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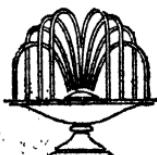


# ENGLISH STORY

*Third Series*

*Edited by*

WOODROW WYATT



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## *Note*

THE objects of *English Story* are threefold :—

- (i) To provide a new outlet for the short story in England, unfettered by standardised requirements of length, theme or treatment;
- (ii) To encourage the young writer who, under present conditions, finds it difficult to see his work published;
- (iii) To bring to the general reading public a half-yearly collection in book form of the most interesting new work of contemporary short story writers.

*English Story* is run on non-commercial lines. That is to say, the first to benefit from the profits are the contributors. Only previously unpublished work by British subjects is accepted. Stories of one to ten thousand words are invited and should be sent to "English Story," 1 End House, Rosemoor Street, London, S.W.3, accompanied by a stamped and addressed envelope. Payment will be made for those published.

### **EDWARD J. O'BRIEN SHORT STORY PRIZE**

The Edward J. O'Brien Short Story Prize, commemorating the late Edward O'Brien and his work for the short story, is awarded annually for the best short story to appear in either of the two series of *English Story* published each year. Its value is Ten Pounds.

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# AMONG THE PIGEONS

## A FOREWORD

IN THE spring of 1940 preparations were begun for the first series of *English Story*. By that time indications of the way in which the War was going to influence writers were coming through. The main interest lay in whether or not the War would break the domination over writing which the Left-wing Group of Auder, Ralph Bates, Isherwood, MacNeice, Spender, Upward, and the rest, and by virtue of his hangover influence, T. S. Eliot, had held for the last ten years or so.

The chief characteristics of this loosely defined group can be summarised. They are applicable not so much to individual writers but to the spirit emanating from the group as a whole.

First, there was the fetish of realism or factual authenticity. This produced a situation in which miners, dockyard workers, factory workers had the monopoly of writing about their callings and were prohibited from writing about anything else, thus dispensing with the need for imagination. Writing became a documentation of selected incidents in the author's life or the people known to him. The result as displayed in *New Writing* and similarly inclined periodicals was lacking in richness, often flat and uninteresting, and sometimes read like an out-of-date news magazine. It was objectivity *ad absurdum*. The heroes of Gordon Jeffrey, B. L. Coombes, Willy Goldman, John Sommerfield and kindred writers are those of fact, barely touched by the imagination. The claim of writers of this type to be creative has little foundation. They do not create at all—they record and retail atmospheres and experiences as highbrow reporters, without controlling or adding to them.

Secondly, perhaps for the first time in literature, a group of writers had to fulfil a self-imposed political requirement.

The would-be writer had to be slavishly Left-wing conscious in his outlook, and make this clear in his subject matter. His work had to contain a large share of bias and be impregnated with a sense of injustice and victimisation. He had to protest, but his protests were not spontaneous or individual. They were already standardised for him, based on Left-wing hypotheses. Provided that he complied with a formula his work stood a chance of a hearing although there seemed to be singularly little genuine Socialist feeling. If the writer could claim to be a member of the working classes so much the better, for it was the era of the amazing discovery that a public school education was not an essential part of a writer's equipment. Constantly one came across stories in the more advanced periodicals whose presence one could only account for because of the author's background—because he left school when he was twelve, or because he was a Communist from Pernambuco—and not because they reached a high standard of writing or were intrinsically important or worth-while. The idea of a story standing on its own ground unsupported by a context of biographical or political detail, of writing as an art, with an end in itself, was on the down grade. More to be considered was whether the author was a good party man and held the orthodox views. To have seen anything in a supposedly vanguard review free from political motivation would have been as strange as seeing the camel making its proverbial journey through the eye of a needle.

This is not to say that writers were not right to identify themselves with the progressive force, or that in the 'thirties it would have been easy to have written otherwise than they did. Nor is it to deny that work of real literary merit was from time to time published by these writers or in these periodicals. But the stultification was in wearing the uniform too strictly, in becoming fixed in stereotyped grooves, and losing vitality thereby. The wornout message has been repeated too often, the "pep" talks have lost their effect in becoming part of a routine. If the writer is to be successful he must remain individual, he must not let himself be dragooned. The writer's function is to be ahead, to lead. Much of the work done in this period has been extremely valuable, but it is only groundwork. It has been

by writers who have been told what to write by Marx and each other. It has been uninspired, querulous, disappointed. There has been no vision, no looking forward, no hope or constructive thought—only complaint. The reader has been offered nothing brighter. He has been taken on a perpetual tour of dissatisfaction, of social injustice, of unemployment, of dismal factual sordidities. He has never been given a fictional picture of life in the hoped-for classless society.

It was the work of the tired, unhappy men: of the men whose youth had been cut short by the last war or who grew up in the shadow of it and could not forget it. They shared the apathy and disappointment of the world instead of getting out beyond it. They stared blankly and could offer no solution. Instead of building on the ruins they limped around them, pointing at them and declaring them uninhabitable. They echoed and did not originate. They were the hollow men who had lost their hope.

The way now is open for a development from this shackled writing of the last ten years, a breaking away from doctrinaire thought. The task of digesting Marx, Proust, Joyce and Co. has been adequately performed by the Left-wing group. But the call of disillusionment, however, is not a permanent one. It is for writers with a braver outlook to build on that foundation and to outline the shape of a more spacious world. They will have a political background instead of a political foreground. In the place of endless descriptions of the horrors of a disorganised society under Capitalism there will be indications of a more harmonious existence under some form of Socialism. They will write more subjectively, because they will not be afraid of individual interpretation. They will employ the imagination in a way that their predecessors never did. Their attitude will be classless and their origin will be of no importance either to themselves or to others.

In *The White Horseman* can be seen some of the first gropings in this direction. In this book a number of young writers under the name of "The New Apocalypse" announce their determination to ignore external concepts and restrictions, to be non-political, and to search for a new myth. The myth, of course, is nothing other than a vague dream

of a future more settled than the confused present. The form of their work is a Romantic growth out of the Classical fossilization of the Left-wing group. The true value of it is slightly obscured by the curiously extravagant claims they make for it, but at least they recognise the necessity for shaking off the now outworn conventions of the last decade and have a glimmering of the writer's most important function—to use the structures of political theorists as a stepping-stone to the next stage, not as a set of regulations to be meticulously followed and continuously promulgated. They deserve more careful consideration than they have had, but naturally the Left-wing group are unlikely to be sympathetic towards them.

Eclectic in choice, *English Story* makes no attempt to dictate the manner in which the writer shall tell his story, and it is too young to have become associated with any particular type or school. The basis of selection can be simply stated. The first consideration is "What is the writer trying to achieve?" Then, "Is his object worth achieving?" That is, does it contribute anything of value, is it an additional factor, does it add anything to the total of human experience, is it a related object or does it merely exist uselessly in a vacuum? And, finally, has the writer succeeded in what he set out to achieve?

Consequently, the new current I have suggested above will be fully represented alongside other contemporary writing and is, in fact, already being so. It is early yet to predict the exact nature and extent of this movement, but it seems certain that it will have wider repercussions and reach a larger public than the work that appeared in the 'thirties because in it are the seeds of construction.

The War has accelerated the growth of this new consciousness. Young writers have realised that the shoutings of their predecessors have failed in their object of waking up the country to the Fascist danger because, following too closely the political pattern, they have been devoid of original direction and out of touch. (The fact that after two years of war huge sections of the country are still unaware of the real issues is proof of that.) Consequently they have already started to make a new kind of literature and to attempt an

imaginative depiction of a different world from the present.

So far there have been few stories about the War itself. Three factors are operative here. One, that before the War, in the years of crisis and counter-crisis, the mind unavoidably dwelt upon war, how soon it would come, and the unpleasantness it would bring to the individual. This evoked a flow of stories about the War in Spain, the War in China, or even some make-believe war. Once the War did arrive the need for speculation was obviated. It was unnecessary to think about it any more, it came as a relief and left the mind clear to think of other things. Two, that this War involving so many nations is war on a grandiose scale, and all the memoirs of infantry officers, the poems of Wilfred Owen, the quietudes on the Western Front, about war on a grandiose scale, have been written before and have covered it from every angle. Three, because of war's gross unfairness to the individual and the futility of combating it, the stories about it tend to be only a final culmination of the wailings of the last ten years, a repetition of them *ad nauseam*.

Some writers avoid this difficulty—notably Alun Lewis, who has a long story in the second series of *English Story*. In this he describes a soldier's return from leave during which his wife, to whom he has not long been married, was killed in an air raid. He does not let the pathos of the subject overpower him and produce blank railings against the society which made such things possible—as a writer of the "New Writing" group would have done. Instead he illustrates the capacity for courage of the human mind in suffering and its power still to hope despite the most crushing blows. At the end of destruction there is a looking forward, not back.

A number of the younger writers have, at this time, a preoccupation with stories about children. These are usually autobiographical in source but they are not treated in the rapportage manner. For anyone under the age of twenty-eight the most settled period in the memory is that of childhood. It is the only one free from external political turmoil and physical anxiety. So it is from here that the young writer who is trying to reach a world of solidity draws his

material. Glyn Jones in "Wat Pantathro" in the second series of *English Story* maintains the balance between the hard, clear description of a drunken father making a fool of himself in a small Welsh town on market night and the individual subjectivity of the small son through whom the story is told. The sentiment is kept well in hand, but we are not deprived of the boy's feelings. He, at first dismayed, rallies himself and, though frightened by the atmosphere surrounding his father, manages to get him into the back of their pony cart and then drives the long journey home with the new half-broken-in horse his father bought that afternoon. The matter here is important because it epitomises the struggle against, and triumph over, chaos by someone who refuses to give in despite the apparent hopelessness of the situation. Henry Treece, in the same series, has a story of childhood drawn from autobiographical sources. Much of this is nightmare, but it nevertheless leaves the reader with a sense of stability—a feeling that the nightmare has been overcome and that the outcome of it will be good. Alun Lewis, J. F. Hendry, and sometimes Nicholas Moore, are among those who handle this subject successfully and draw something of the future from it. The danger here is that if the childhood theme is used for the purpose of escapism, instead of construction, nostalgia may destroy the intended effect.

Among the writers who represent the new, stronger outlook the most outstanding are at present Alun Lewis, Henry Treece, J. Maclare-Ross, Nicholas Moore, Charles Furbank and William Sansom.

Several of them are also poets in the accepted sense. By this I mean that they write poetry in verses. But I think they are going to find that the poetry they put into their prose will be more important to them. The immediate task is for the writers who are also artists to establish contact once more with the great mass of people. Then they can show that it is they, the supposed dreamers, who are really the practical men with a constructive plan and that it is the business men, the political men of affairs, under whose leadership we have arrived at muddle and disruption, who have been chasing the crazy illusion. But this bridgehead

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can only be made in the popular idiom and, however optimistically you look at it, verse is no longer the language of the best-seller. As Edmund Wilson says in *The Triple Thinkers* :

“Literary techniques are tools, which the masters of the craft always alter in adapting them to their new uses. To become too much attached to the old tools is sometimes to ignore the masters.”

The future of poetry lies in prose. It is a hard fact for those with a sentimental hankering after the old forms, but it is an unalterable one, and to the new writers, in the revaluations that the War is causing, it should not be unacceptable.

On a long view it seems that the War has had a salutary effect on young writers, although it does not form the subject of their work to any great extent. Because their lives are no longer soft, and full of apprehension, as they were in the days between the wars, young writers are becoming more visionary; their doubts are resolved, they know what they are up against. Their old way of life has already been taken from them and they have seen the failure of the pursuit of orthodox dogmas by the Left-wing group, either to maintain it for them, or to lead to the construction of a more livable world. They are searching for their own solution, for their own interpretation of the future—learning from their predecessors, but not relying on them. They have a new sense of urgency which has made them reflect on their responsibility in relation to the spirit of their writings. Each of the young writers of any interest have in common the fact that they are looking forward unbounded by pre-ordained standards; and are trying, by using their imagination, and writing more personally, to replace the confusion and disillusionment of the writing of the last decade by something more settled and something in which there is more of hope than despair. They are realising their obligations as leaders of opinion, not as followers. And it is the War which has impelled them to this outlook, and which has, by making it more difficult to present it, created the necessary energy and determination to undertake the task.

WOODROW WYATT.

# THE TOURNAMENT

by

## WILLIAM SANSOM

HIGH above the arena huge bronze banners swayed in the light wind. Now and again they quivered as vibrations from the seven wurlitzers flowed up and down their sides, lightly touching them to brazen gooseflesh with a million electric finger-tips.

The peoples of the world sat row upon row up the chromium tiers, ever higher, until the highest could only take their bird's-eye view of the contest through the standard glass magnifying screens. The peoples sat in groups of race, nation and community. All nearest the arena were gravely apprehensive of the contest's outcome; but, as the tiers rose further away, faces reflected a progressive smile until on the furthest tiers—whither had filtered many of the nearer people's leaders—there were scenes of song and mad picnicking.

These furthest people scarcely heard the furious noise thrown out by a network of giant megaphones that sprouted like ebony toadstools among the nearer crowd. The power of these giants was such that several men and women had already been sucked away into them by the intake of the announcers' breath. Now they were booming:

“... IN AN INTERNATIONAL CONTEST, FOR THE CHAMPIONSHIP OF THIS WORLD ... ON MY WEST—  
THE BLACK TANK!”

At this moment the western gates of the arena slid open and an immense tank scuttled into the arena. A quarter way across it braked to a dead stop, flinging up clouds of the metal dust that served for sand. The tank was painted a dull, heavy black. Now from the open gate came running ten black figures. They wore black rubber suits and jack-boots. Their tall crash-helmets likened them to big-headed ants

prancing upright. They ranged themselves in a close rank behind the tank.

As these men entered, a long cheer went up from the crowd: yet few people smiled. When the cheer at last died down the megaphones continued:

"... AND ON MY EAST, the red engine!"

Curiously, the last words sounded soft, far away. It seemed almost as if the power had been turned down. Nevertheless the crowd gave a great cheer. But this was unfortunately cut short as the megaphones hurriedly continued to announce the details of the contest.

On the words "red engine," the east gates opened and a scarlet fire-engine drove in to a fine clatter of bells. It was an unusual machine, lightly armoured, with a large water monitor positioned on a central turret. As it braked—also a quarter way across the arena—its team of ten men filed in at the double from the gate. Eight of these men wore polished brass helmets, blue jackets, and high leather water-leggings. The remaining two, the outriders, were encased in white asbestos suits. With their wide square helmets and their great blunt boots they might have been divers—deep snow divers. They ranged themselves in open rank behind the fire-engine.

Meanwhile the megaphones continued: "AN ELEMENTAL DUEL BETWEEN FIRE AND WATER! THE BLACK TANK A FLAME-THROWER—THE RED ENGINE DELIVERING JETS OF FOAM. WITH THESE TWO WEAPONS ALONE THE COMBATANTS WILL ENGAGE. NO OTHER TACTIC OUTSIDE THE PLAIN ENGAGEMENT OF FIRE AND WATER WILL BE COUNTENANCED. THIS IS THE RULE."

"COMBAT COMMENCES ON THE SOUNDING OF THE SIREN. THERE WILL BE NEITHER ROUND NOR RESPITE. THIS IS A FIGHT TO THE DEATH. THE BLACK TANK, THE BLACK TANK VERSUS the red engine."

Down in the arena the teams climbed into their machines. Now just the tank and the armoured fire-engine faced each other, hostile insects on a vast field of metal dust. No life. Except for the fire outriders, poised and motionless as

gargoyles. The mighty steam wurlitzers sobbed out huge music in a crescendo that seemed to stretch the waiting air to bursting-point. Hymns were sung. Anthems resounded in the concrete bays. Men and women sung gravely, but soon a light of hysteria began to fire their eyes. Both suspense and sound were not long to be born. Up aloft, as though scolded by a violent wind, the bronze banners thrashed high between their stanchions. Then, above the magma of sound, a sudden high note froze the air—the rapier whine of the sirens. The fight was on.

The symphony of wurlitzers and megaphones ceased. There was silence as the two machines burst into action. Then the tank roared its open engine, shattered the air with the planking and grinding of heavy steel caterpillars. The red engine was quieter, running on thick rubber tyres: only its bell clanged at every jolt and turn.

The two machines looked remarkably like insects as they darted towards each other. With tractors, the tank seemed to scuttle—a dangerous, unreal motion. The fire engine moved more like a beetle, with directional legs. The tank took the initiative. It was the more offensive in character. It scuttled towards the red engine, paused, veered in a sudden half-inch, and then came roaring in on the flank. As it entered range, a long feather of fire spat from its turret. At first like a pole of liquid, gradually feathering out as it lost impetus. The flame tore straight at the red engine, greedy as a bullet. But simultaneously there spun out from the red engine's monitor a similar searching feather. At first it looked like white fire; but there was a subtle, tactile difference. This stuff was waterous, clouded, heavy; it flecked, like a snow-storm. It was chemical foam, directed under pressure from the snub muzzle of the monitor.

The two jets met midway, converged, and died in a mushroom of black smoke. A few flecks of white spindrift spattered the dull steel of the tank: one or two drops of liquid fire blistered the engine's red paint. The two machines roared past each other and away.

The tank slewed round and scuttled in again to the attack. This time it took a zigzag course. The fire-engine sat still. The monitor muzzle followed the tank's course as if

it were magnetically controlled. Then the flame again. This time it lobbed up, howitzer fashion. But the foam caught it in mid-air. And then the two elements stayed grappling in a grip of smoke as the machines circled. So steady was this circular movement, so rigid the fire, that the black smoke seemed a pivot forcing the machines round.

Up on the tiers the megaphones had begun a commentary. For an impartial body, they seemed strangely biased in favour of the black tank. At the same time they made marked mention of the red engine's tenacity. Tenacity—that bouquet so readily thrown by victim to vanquished, that famous escape of the uninitiative. Meanwhile the megaphones blared with hardly concealed enthusiasm of the daring curvets, flankings, feints and headlong onslaughts of the great black tank. Once the megaphone suggested, subtly, that the crowd should cry out for the black tank. Hypnotised, the crowd responded. Their applause became rhythmic. Like a steam piston gathering momentum, there evolved a concerted collegiate "Rah! rah! rah!" The colleges of the nations swayed and shouted.

Among them was a man called Leftbridge. He was any man. He stood on the second tier. His shabby grey trilby bobbed up and down to the rhythm of the rah; his polished boots drummed the concrete; his eyes, normally misted and pale, shone with excited brilliance; even his tired, sandy moustache took on regular form as the mouth beneath piped its energetic "rahs." Mr. Leftbridge was enjoying himself. He had come to the arena with no special favourite in mind. Really, no one had ever asked him before to think about such things. He had always left world championships to the leaders. "They" knew what they were doing. At the back of his mind he had a vague partiality for the fire-engine. It symbolised his vague principles, his tradition. But now, under the exciting tutelage of the megaphones, he began to favour the black tank. He was dazzled by its compact efficiency. "They know what they want, those fellows," he said to himself. "I like a man to go after what he wants." Mr. Leftbridge had never gone after what he wanted. He had never had the courage. But it was a sweet dream of his, dreamed since his schoolday reading of Dick Daring and the

pirates and the desert islands. In his middle age, he realised these ambitions by projecting them into other men: and admired them from afar, self-contented at second-hand. He felt he could have done the same, given the time. Mr. Leftbridge stamped his feet and shouted "Rah! rah! rah! That's the stuff to give 'em!"

Down in the arena the tank disengaged itself and scuttled off to the west gate. The red engine followed, but slowed down as it observed the tank's turret to open. Two men climbed out and limped towards the gate. The red engine braked, prepared to give the tank breathing space until its injured crew should be replaced. But just then the turret snapped tight, and at full speed the tank charged. The red engine was caught off guard. Flame caught it full on the flank, ripping off the red paint in long blisters, searing in through every vantage hole. This all happened in a second—then the tank was past and away. One side of the red engine smoked black and blistered. One of the outriders had dropped, shrivelled with the heat. There must have been some casualties inside: nevertheless, the machine swung round and accelerated in pursuit of the tank. The engine was essentially a defensive appliance, but if it introduced enough foam into the tank the crew would evacuate to avoid drowning.

"Rah! Rah! Rah!" went the crowd and Mr. Leftbridge waved his trilby exultantly. Really, this was fine! What a splendid manœuvre! What cunning, what strength of purpose! At first he had felt uneasily that there was something not quite honourable in the trick. But the megaphones' enthusiasm had soon reassured him. With greater fervour he piped out his "rahs!" The rhythm exhilarated him. He was delighting in being led. It was a rest for his initiative. Being led, he was protected from his conscience.

He looked round and saw the rest of the great crowd waving and stamping and shouting. He laughed aloud. There they were—thousands of people, "rahing" for the Black Tank! Fine! And he was one of them! This was a loving freemasonry. It was comforting to know that every manjack of the crowd would approve of him. A common bond—for the first time he felt he could go up to any man

and shake him by the hand, no longer timorous of the stranger's reaction. At last he was certain. Now the wurlitzers played a march. Mr. Leftbridge began to sing at the top of his voice.

The tanks and the engine were at grips again. The two interlaced jets, red and white, swayed and swivelled for advantage: Sometimes the machines ranged the entire length of the arena, flank to flank. Sometimes one or other stopped dead, firing at its enemy's tail. Sometimes they closed in and braked; then their swivelling turrets alone continued the duel. This was the most fearsome sight of all. It brought to mind the motion of hostile ants duelling softly with slowly waving antennæ.

Thus the combat continued for nearly an hour—until the tank suddenly introduced a new tactic. From a wide periphery it charged full out at the red engine. Its flame thrower was withdrawn, all hatches tightly closed. It seemed intent on ramming. Only at five yards did it brake from maximum speed. Then it swung round sharply. It came skidding flank on—until its black hull all but grazed the scorched armour of the engine. Then it reversed, then it flew forwards, reversed, flew forwards—all within two lengths of itself. As its grinding tractors champed and worried the ground, a great cloud of metal dust rose to bury the red engine. For a few seconds both machines were lost in cloud. Then out scuttled the tank, drenched in foam and dust. Halting in the open, it raised its shutters, slewed round, and threw out its flame-throwing muzzle for the attack.

The cloud of metal dust subsided. The red engine was grey, coated thickly with grit. The grit had blown right in everywhere. Through the open shutters, heaping into the monitor's muzzle, blinding the eyes of the crew, clogging the well-oiled mechanism. The engine spluttered, tried vainly to start. The black tank charged. Flame seared along its path. Then—the tank made a mistake. It braked, and prepared to burn out the engine at its leisure. One of the engine's outriders, protected from the dust by his white asbestos casing, leapt off his platform and sprinted towards the tank. Just as the flame spurted, he jumped up at the black turret—and thrust his body over the flame thrower's muzzle. He locked

his arms round the muzzle and lay there to die. The red engine now had time to clear away the dust.

Up on the tiers the megaphones seemed to have forgotten the rules they had so recently proclaimed. "NO OTHER TACTIC BUT THE PLAIN ENGAGEMENT OF FIRE AND WATER WILL BE COUNTENANCED." That was what they had said. But now—now magically their tone was transposed! "A MOST BRILLIANT MANŒUVRE ON THE PART OF THE BLACK! . . . DID YOU SEE IT? WHAT DARING, WHAT TANKMANSHIP! BY LUCK THE ENEMY HAS MANAGED TO COUNTER THE BLOW—BUT AT GREAT EXPENSE! THREE CHEERS NOW FOR THE INVINCIBLE BLACK!"

Mr. Leftbridge opened his mouth to cheer. His "rah" began firm—and then faltering slower, slower, deeper, deeper, like a gramophone record running down. In that second, Mr. Leftbridge doubted. This time he was more than uneasy about the possibility of a dishonourable trick. This time he knew in his neatly polished boots that the tank was fouling. The magic of the megaphones paled. Uncertain of his neighbours, he continued to shape "rahs" with his mouth as he turned to look along the tier. He noticed that several other people seemed embarrassed—they coughed, fiddled with their hats, glanced quickly at their boots. The volume of cheering diminished. Mr. Leftbridge began to feel indignant.

The megaphones turned on the power. This time they abandoned any pretence at all.

" . . . HELLO! WHAT'S THIS . . . NOT CHEERING? COME, YOU CAN DO BETTER THAN THAT! NOW, PLEASE, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, ALL TOGETHER . . . A REAL ROUSER . . . READY? THEN RAH! RAH! RAH! RAH! . . . "

Gradually the people began cheering again. High voltage and easy rhetoric took charge of their senses with fluent ease. The little indignation died. Soon Mr. Leftbridge felt the old excitement flexing the muscles of his face again.

In the arena there was a short pause for refuelling. This was accomplished at lightning speed by mobile tenders. But since the fire-engine had to take aboard an exceptionally

large load of water, the tank was fully charged and prepared for combat much the earliest.

The incredible happened. Disobeying all the rules of the international games, openly flaunting one of society's most elementary ethics, the tank attacked while the red engine's mechanism was still dismantled. Tied to the tender by hose-pipes, its armour raised, the red engine was immobilised and exceptionally vulnerable. There was no scuttling in the tank's movement now. It came charging across the metal dust like a bull. From the tiers, a minute black bull with head lowered in blind fury, pounding across those metal grey sands. As it drew within range, the long vermilion feather sprayed from its turret, washing the waiting engine. There was nothing the firemen could do.

But up on the tiers the cheering had suddenly ceased: in its place, a moment's silence, then a long sob of horror. Vainly the megaphones boomed. But this time the people were free. They had tolerated, they had been deceived by everything but this ultimate treachery. It was too gross a shock for their human hearts. Not all the most cunningly devised propaganda, nor the greatest psychological deceptions, nor the projections of the greatest power houses in the world could set the lie to so deep an intuition of evil.

Mr. Leftbridge jumped from his seat, vaulted a rail, sprinted down the concrete gangway towards the arena. He held no set ideas in his head. He was impelled simply by an intuitive urge to "get at" the Black Tank. Others followed him. The gangway struggled with people.

Flame seared the sides of the red engine. The crew had managed to lower the armour plating that covered the main mechanism. But the fire still tore in through every opening. Now they abandoned the machine. But as they jumped clear, they held in their hands the nozzles of hoses. And as they ran clear, white snakes of hose flaked out behind them. There were only six of them. They ran with their hoses in a wide circle round the tank. The hose lengths spewed out like the tentacles of an octopus. Then the foam came on. Six white poles shot out at the tank.

There was an answer. The flame thrower swung round and swept at them. It swept at them horizontally as a

garden brush sweeps at leaves. One by one the firemen shrivelled and dropped.

But now the crowd was in the arena. As the firemen fell, men and women grabbed the nozzles and kept the foam pouring straight. Again and again the turret circled, burning and shrivelling its enemies. But as they fell, new hands took on the job. There was no end to those new hands. And ever the circle closed in.

The tank was now a little hill of foam. The flame thrower hardly broke the veil of heavy suds. Soon it faltered and died. Somewhere inside the hill, a hatch opened, and the black crew leapt free. They scrambled wildly to escape drowning. They were arrested and taken away.

The tank was left in the centre of the arena to rust for ever....

#### WILLIAM SANSOM.

Born 1912. Before the War directed and wrote radio programmes abroad and once worked in a bank. Now in the N.F.S. Has published a number of short stories.

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## CONVERSATIONS IN EBURY STREET

*by*

CHARLES FURBANK

“**S**ALUD, camarada,” I said.

“Ah, you speak Spanish!” said the waiter.

“No, only Hemingway,” I said.

“It’s the next best thing,” he said, smiling at me.

“Why the happy smile?” I said. “Is that the feeling you get from being a member of a working-class democracy?”

“No, it’s the joke you just made. It’s the first Hemingway joke I’ve ever heard in the flesh.”

"I didn't know there were such jokes."

"Don't you ever read the American papers?" he said.

"No," I said, "I'm English."

"What of it? I'm Spanish, and I read the American papers."

"The Spanish are a very cultured people," I said.

"Thank you," said the waiter. "What are you going to have to drink?"

"What d'you suggest?"

"I suggest beer," said the waiter.

"Have you any draught?"

"No, only bottle," he said, as if it was unreasonable to ask for draught.

"Oh, bottled will do just as well," I said.

The waiter went out to get the beer. I looked round the café. It was a very large café, and it was full of foreigners. There were a lot more Spaniards fighting around in Spain than you'd think from reading the papers. I'd been in Madrid for four hours, and I hadn't seen anyone except Spaniards. No one at all, not even a Frenchman, and unless the Russians looked like the Spaniards I hadn't seen any of them either. I guessed the English and the Americans might be harder to see, as most of them out there were famous, and famous people are always harder to see, but I'd at least expected to see some foreign-legion-looking Germans. No, it was just Spaniards all the time; not that I've got any antipathy towards Spaniards. I think they're a very cultured people, as I said to the waiter, but I could only speak a few words of their cultured language, so it didn't look like being much of an evening.

Just as I was thinking all this an American hospital nurse came into the café. I stood up and waved to her.

"Hallo, comrade hospital nurse," I said, "come and have some beer."

"How did you know I was a hospital nurse?" she said. She had on the sort of civilian clothes that American hospital nurses wear.

"By the can!" I said. "That unmistakable internee's despair! Put it on the chair, sweetheart," I said.

"You're fresh!"

"I should be, I only got into this town four hours ago."

"What'd you come here for?"

"Maybe so I can get a battalion of the International Brigade called after me."

"You poor white, you café joker!" she said. "Maybe you're a reporter for the London *News Chronicle*? That's a paper that's greatly admired in America."

"It's greatly admired in England as well," I said. "They had a letter from industrial Wales the other day, saying that many people in Wales believed the *News Chronicle* was the real fighting paper for the working class."

"Is it?"

"As near as makes no difference."

"And you," she said. "What are you?"

"Maybe I'm a maker of jungle movies," I said.

"Then what are you doing in Washington—I mean Madrid?"

"What was General Howe doing in New York?"

"Rioting."

"That's all right then," I said.

"This is one way of spending an evening," she said, looking round the café. "Where's that beer you promised me?"

"It's coming right now," I said, and sure enough a waiter came along with a couple of bottles just as I was speaking. It was a different waiter.

"You've been a hell of a while getting that beer! D'you make it on the premises?" I said.

But being a working-class democracy the waiter didn't have to answer a question like that, so he just swore at me under his breath.

"Where's the other waiter?" I said.

"He was shot by a member of the Fifth Column while crossing the square to get your beer," he said.

"I don't believe it; I haven't heard any shots," I said.

"He has gone off duty," said the other waiter, and went away.

"Now, again," said the American nurse, "please tell me why you're here?"

"I've always wanted to enjoy being at a public school, so here I am," I said.

"A public school!" she said. "An English public school!"

"Or a Scottish one," I said. "I've always thought a public school would be great if you could believe in it, and now here's a public-school atmosphere you can believe in. You know, work hard and play hard for the sake of the school, and not yourself, or for coloured caps, or for any other cheap allurements. Just for the Commissar's hand on your shoulder and international justice. It's a fine ideal," I said.

"You distinguished English author, you damn' bloody fool, you anti-joker," she said, "to hell with your fun!"

"Hey, keep it up, Ada! Remember the Hippocratean oath," I said. "I'm entirely pro. You completely mistake me; I'm pro all the time, I wouldn't be anti for anything. It's just that I like a joke occasionally."

"You look anti," she said. "You look just how a member of the Fifth Column looks."

"Please, don't say that, you make me feel terrible," I said. "I execrate the Fifth Column. I'm all for energetic action against them."

"Then why don't you join in the songs they're singing over there, instead of just sitting over here and talking. Don't you ever do anything but talk?"

I looked over to where she was pointing, at some soldiers singing patriotic songs about three being the Comintern, and the Soviet land being so dear to every worker, set to old Irish melodies. At the edge of the group was a sailor who was trying to join in, but you could tell he didn't really know the words, and was having to hum most of them, and fake the mouth movements to make it look natural. I felt sorry for the sailor. Republican sailors were having a rotten time in the war. Once, at a public meeting, I got up and asked a distinguished member of the International Brigade why the Republican Navy hadn't been able to play a more active part in the war, and he told me that the Republican fleet was unable to put to sea, as they couldn't get any spare parts for refitting, as the spare parts were of British manufacture. The audience thought well of the question, and many of them thought I was a sailor, some even said I was an Invergordon mutineer, though I hardly looked old enough for that. Anyway, I knew the Republican sailors

were having a bad time, so I thought I'd ask him over to our table. I made a sign to the waiter.

"Ask the naval comrade to join us," I said.

"Sailors are no-good bums, they'll drink all your beer," he said.

"You're a pretty poor comrade to talk like that about the heroic defenders of your country. It's 'Especial train for Atkins when the trooper's on the tide' now," I said, "and you're still at the 'Chuck him out, the brute' stage. You've got it all wrong," I said. "Go over and ask him nicely to join us."

"All the same, sailors are no good," said the second waiter.

"Good-evening, comrades of both sexes," said the sailor.

I poured out some beer for him.

"Not so good as 'Le chant des matelots'?" I said, pointing at the soldiers.

"I don't know," he said, "we never sang where I came from."

"Where d'you come from, sailor?" said the nurse.

"You never ask questions in war-time," I said.

"I was a fisherman out of Barcelona," he said.

"Why didn't you sing?" I said. "That's not a personal question, that's an anthropological inquiry."

"Because we didn't know any songs, I guess."

"What did you do then, just stand about in a noble way like they do in citizen defence posters?" I said.

"There's an old Spanish proverb that says an Englishman's humour's as efficient as his automatic rifle!" said the sailor.

"He's a popular party sailor," I said to the nurse. "He knows all the latest Spanish proverbs. When I sat down at my automatic rifle they all laughed, but when I'd finished there wasn't a sound. Like the oysters!" I said. "They were all dead. What a laugh! What a killer! Just a new twist to the piano ad. gag, and there you are," I said. "It's a gift!"

"Tell me what you do," she said. "Just tell me, you don't have to tell him anything; he knows it all from the magazines."

"We talk," he said.

"What do men like you talk about when you're alone together?" said the nurse.

"Three things," said the sailor, "football, Anarchism, and film stars."

"Greta Garbo, the Fourth International, and the Barcelona Hospital Cup—well, it's a great world," I said.

"Not only Greta Garbo," he said. "We in Spain know of many talented actresses beside Greta Garbo. Women of equal talent and superior beauty!"

"Oh, I see, you're not a fan, I'm sorry," I said.

"I wouldn't say that; it's just the imputation of the small range of subjects I don't like. If you keep abreast of current affairs there are any amount of things to talk about. Not just Greta Garbo and the Hospital Cup. Who cares about charity games anyway?"

"What about bull-fighting?" said the nurse. "That's a very good sport also. I thought bull-fighting was the national sport of Spain?"

"It's bull-fighting that's got us where we are to-day. It's a terrible anachronism," he said. "Only antis are interested in bull-fighting."

"You must meet my friend," said the nurse, pointing to me. "He's a famous matador."

"Are you really?" he said. "Will you let me have your autograph?"

"No, I'm not really. It's just her way of saying she thinks I'm anti."

"Are you?"

"No."

"I'm glad to hear that," he said. "I didn't really think anyone could be anti after coming and seeing the facts for themselves."

"Has he come to study the facts?" said the nurse. "That's what I'd like to know. What has he come to study?"

"That's right, comrade, tell us what you came here for?"

"It's the only way to meet interesting people nowadays," I said.

"Oh dear, comrade, you shouldn't say things like that," said the sailor, "you shouldn't really."

"What the hell does it matter what he says?" she said.

"He's a nice boy, he reads the *News Chronicle*, he'll never come to any harm."

"Let's talk about something uncontroversial. Let's talk about Anarchism," I said.

"There you have me," he said. "Come on, call me a Trotskyist Wrecker, strike home, don't spare me!"

"I'm an Anarchist too," said the nurse, "though politics seem unimportant when you do the work I do!"

"Turn out your lamp, Florence Nightingale!" I said. "So am I! Now we've a common interest to base our friendship on, I'll get some more beer."

I called the waiter over, and ordered three more bottles. When I gave the order he looked over towards the sailor, as if to say, "I told you he'd soon drink your beer!"

"I don't like that waiter," said the sailor, "he looks like a liberal democrat."

"Waiters are all radicals, they believe in a single tax," said the nurse. "They're very nice people when you get to know them."

"I'm sick of just sitting here; let's go and Trotsky wreck something!" I said.

"Thank you!" she said. "That was sweet of you; we just had a chance to be friendly, and you have to say something smart."

"The more I go through life, the more I find the necessity of friendship," said the sailor. "Anarchists are friendly people. You won't find truer friends in the whole of Spain. I wish more people would be friendly and try and understand our point of view."

"He wants to start a beautiful friendship with you," I said to the nurse. "You could write a book on your experiences in a few years' time. 'I Lived with an Anarchist on Eight Dollars a Week; what we lacked in money we made up in mutual friendship!'"

"That's rather good, you're a funny fellow," said the sailor.

"Oh, you like him too! Here's someone else that appreciates the new style of humour the *News Chronicle* is popularising," she said.

"D'you write for the London *News Chronicle*?" he said.

"No, I don't do any of the things she says I do. She's

just making things up to amuse us. She's a nice hospital nurse, she keeps everyone's spirits up."

"Ah, you're a nurse!" he said.

"Well, what of it?" she said.

"They all know you're a nurse," I said. "It's that comforting can that gives you away."

"D'you hoard foodstuffs?" he asked her indignantly.

"We've got him on the idiom at last," I said. "I'm not talking about tins, I'm talking about her happy-go-lucky hindquarters."

"Ah, I see, the young lady's behind!"

"Do you, by God," she said. "Another one like that, you merry marine, and I'll see you in the sailor's hospital! How did you learn to speak so smart anyway?" she said.

"It's like on the movies: the minor characters speak Spanish, the part players, like waiters, speak with an accent, and the important characters, like myself, speak English."

"That's very convenient!" she said.

"I'll get some more beer," I said. "Here's to educated Anarchy!"

"Skin off your bum!" he said, winking at the nurse.

"I'm warning you boys," she said. "One *News Chronicle* reader's enough."

"Tell us about Anarchy from the inside, and how the movement's going," I said.

"Badly," he said, "badly. Whatever happens, we get it. The only thing we can hope for is peace, and you never get anarchy in peace-time. It's terrible having to make up your mind you're going to be shot next year, but you've got to. Every political party in Spain, no matter what it is, always has it down on its agenda to shoot the Anarchists next year. Sometimes you can get an extension for a year, but you've always got to be ready to be shot the next year. It's worrying," he said; "you can't marry a nice girl and settle down, when you've got it hanging over you all the time. But I wouldn't be anything but an Anarchist for all that; it's a great family tradition with us. My grandfather planted the first time-bomb in Catalonia. If it had gone off an hour earlier we might have been living in the United States of Europe now."

“Why?” I said.

“I don’t know, but that’s what they told me at home. He was a great old man, my grandfather. He believed in direct action. If he hadn’t got anything else, he’d pick up a stone and throw it! He didn’t believe in tyranny of any sort.”

“But surely they wouldn’t shoot a nice boy like you?” said the nurse.

“You don’t know, they’d shoot anybody now. It’s awful the way they’ve started to shoot each other now. It’s worse than ever before.”

“You poor boy, you make me feel quite melancholy,” she said.

“Thank you, thank you so much,” he said. “I’d rather have your sympathy than anyone’s in the whole world. I’ve often dreamt of a woman like you. Not just a silly girl, but some really beautiful woman. Someone intelligent. Someone you can really talk to; and an Anarchist like myself. You’re my dream come true!” he said.

“You’ve got quite a line, you fisherman out of Barcelona,” she said. “You speak like a fisher of men!”

“Ah, Bible references, that favourite American sport,” he said. “You’ve got every right to be happy, you’re so young and beautiful. Often when we’re afloat I can’t sleep for imagining someone like you. Now you’ve materialised. I raise up my glass and drink to you,” he said. “I drink to you, Goldenhair, my desire, my American beauty!” ✓

“Be quiet, you bloody sailor!” I said. “She’s my hospital nurse, I found her first.”

“You don’t count now. It’s just between us. It’s quite simple now—just the man and the woman. Lady, I want you, I’ve wanted you ever since I reached manhood,” he said. “I want you just as I want anarchy, as an all-enveloping belief.”

“Don’t forget that you’re going to be shot next year! I’m just an Anarchist that’s not going to be shot next year; that’s very inferior,” I said.

“She already knows that,” he said. “I’m sorry to have to be like this, but this is something out beyond us. Come with me now,” he said to the nurse. “Come with me, anywhere.

This is our hour, this is our time together on earth. I love you, I desire you, I want you more than anything else in the world!" .

"You jolly jack tar; first you drink my beer, 'and now you want to take my girl. You wouldn't like to borrow my pocket comb as well, would you?"

"Why, is my hair untidy?"

"The waiter was right—you're no good, you're just a lousy tramp; go to hell!" I said.

"What did that waiter say about me?" he shouted. "I knew he said something. I could see it from his face, the sneaking lackey!"

"I'm sorry to disturb you boys," she said, "but I've got to be getting back now. I'm on duty again in half an hour's time."

"No, you can't go now, you can't just walk out like this! A woman's only got one duty in war-time!"

"Listen to him!" I said to her. "You'll be an unmarried mother before you can say knife."

"To be an unmarried mother is to be something very honourable now," he said. "Good parents are proud that their daughters should be the mothers of the fallen heroes of the revolution."

"I'm sorry. It was a nice evening though. Thanks for the beer," she said.

Just as she got up from the table, the original waiter returned and came up to our table.

"Good-evening, Miss Belasco," he said. "I hope these boys haven't been annoying you?"

"Oh no, they've been very nice to me," she said. "They're a pair of Anarchists from out of town."

"You oughtn't to mix with such anti-social types, Miss Belasco," he said.

"What d'ye mean, anti-social?" I said. "You're too damn' fresh for a waiter, even if this is a working-class democracy."

"Good-night, boys," she said to us. "Don't be annoyed with them," she said to the waiter.

"Just go to hell, will you!" I said.

"That's exactly where I am going," she said. "That's where I work, right in hell."

"Go to hell, you bitch!" I said, "and don't be so goddam pleased about your profession."

"You shouldn't speak to any lady like that," said the sailor.

"That was no lady," I said. "That was my wife!"

"I think she ought to have been my wife as well. I'd very much like an American wife, they've got the nicest appearances," he said, "and nobody'd shoot me if I had an American wife."

"Have another beer?"

"Well, I ought really to be rejoining my ship now."

"Why, have you got it parked out in the Gran Via?"

"That's good," he said. "I liked the place name."

"Here's to American wives," I said. "Bottoms up!"

"Here's to Eventual Anarchy," he said.

"As if that's ever likely to happen!"

"Yes, as if that's ever likely to happen," he said. "Good-night, comrade, and thank you for everything."

"Good-night. Wear plenty of hymn books over your heart, and don't let them pass you any wooden nickels," I said.

He smiled at me and walked out, leaving me alone.

It suddenly occurred to me I'd been just sitting there and talking all the evening, nothing had happened to me at all. Absolutely nothing. It made me feel very angry. Here was I in a besieged city in the middle of a revolution, and still everyone just talked.

"Well," I shouted, "isn't there going to be any action at all? Don't any of you happy flint-locks ever fight? Isn't there ever going to be any civil commotion? For Christ's sake start something! Anything, acts of foreign enemy, hostilities (whether war be declared or not), any bloody thing you like. Resurrection, conception, insurrection, military or usurped power, making man one with God, malicious persons acting for or on behalf of political organisations. Come on, use your ingenuity. Give me the elements of tragedy, then. Fill me with pity and terror! Purge me, please, for Christ's sake purge me!" I shouted. "Give me some action, and some healthy exercise, I want to sleep to-night. It's essential I should sleep to-night! For God's sake give me

some action, anything, as long as it's action, for pity's sake give me some action!" I shouted.

They just sat there, they didn't take any notice at all, they didn't even say anything consoling, like "The mad Englishman!" they just sat there and said nothing. Maybe they thought I was trying to join in the patriotic songs the soldiers were still singing. The second waiter came over to me.

"How about going back to your hotel?" he said. "The high altitude of the Meseta often makes people feel tired at first; even I feel pretty tired. I wish I was going home," he said.

"That's a nice thing to be able to say to drunks; it's even nicer than telling them you come from Los Angeles too. But I'm not drunk," I said. "You've got the wrong idea, I'm just bored."

"I never said you were drunk, it's just the air, you'll feel better to-morrow. There's nothing much doing to-night, but to-morrow's our gala night. We've got a banjo band and a tap dancer coming. Be sure you come along to-morrow," he said.

"O.K., I think I will go back now," I said.

"That's right," he said, "and mind out for the Fifth Column shooting you out of windows."

"It just needed that," I said. "Look to the right and look to the left and you'll never, never be run over!"

"Safety first's a very good slogan," he said.

"You're right," I said. "Good-night."

"Good-night, comrade," he said.

## CHARLES FURBANK.

Born 1918. Was killed flying with the R.A.F., in which he was a sergeant, in August, 1942. Only previous publications are two short stories in the old *London Mercury* and one in *English Story: Second Series*.

# RICH RELATIONS

by  
NIGEL HESELTINE.

COMING from the station at sunset, driven by Bosseye in the glass-fronted fly, there are a few curves in the lane, a few cottages. They were lighting the lamps at the house.

His mother came out into the front hall and kissed him with dry lips. "How long your hair is! You're getting fat." His coat was too short and his bottom looked fat. Bosseye brought up the small suitcase. "Foreign labels," she said. "You've been abroad again."

"Not again. I should have told you."

"Told me? Would you though?"

"I write often enough."

"Not so often. Once a fortnight isn't often, and you tell me nothing at all very often."

Here in the front hall, he thought, I've been two minutes in the house. With his hand in his pocket, he rammed the nails into the palm.

"Did you pay Stevens?"

"No." He had twopence left.

"You should have. Call him back."

"He's gone."

"Well, you're in your own room. We'll have dinner directly." He looked for the small suitcase, but the maid had taken it. "Hang your coat up before you go."

He went up the stairs, looked out of the window on the half-landing. Over the stable roof, a pale-blue patch in the sky; the yard was dark; rooks cawing and flying back to the woods around. He listened to the rooks and breathed the good air smelling of leaves and grasses: he breathed after the city. Then he went on upstairs lest his mother should see him and speak.) The maid was unpacking his clean shirt, his pyjamas, his thin shoes: he asked her about

her brother, her mother, the village, and she said yes, and she said no.

"You brought no evening clothes, sir?"

"No, Alice."

She left him with a jug of hot water and he washed and came down. His mother sat under a lamp in the drawing-room, embroidering. "So nice to have you back," she said; then, looking up, "Oh, not dressed? Where are your evening clothes?"

They were pawned long ago.

"I didn't bring them," he said. "Not for a short visit."

"A short visit? You're not going away again?"

"In a few days. I'm rather busy now."

"Well, I'm glad you can spare me a few days if you're so busy."

"My work . . ."

"Yes, tell me about your work. I hope you're not still seeing that dirty person."

"Who?" knowing who she meant from a chance meeting of hers. He could not say who this dirty person was.

"You know quite well who I mean: Mr. Banner or something."

"Oh, Vanna, I do see him sometimes. He's very brilliant."

"He may be brilliant. It always pays to know decent people; you'll be sorry when you're older: I have tried my best."

"Vanna's taught me a great deal, he's a famous man."

"Famous? I've never met anyone who's ever heard of him."

They went in to dinner: soup, fish, entrée, sweet, etc., silver on the table, linen napkins, two servants waiting. He ate a great deal, hungrily: while he ate he thought of what he had to do here, then of brightly lit places where he spent evenings in the city. He thought of his rooms and his girl. She'd be out to-night. She couldn't stay in alone. "He's gone down home," she'd say, "to get some money."

The maid gave him beer, his mother didn't get up wine for him. When the old man died she locked up the wine-cellars. "We'll keep what we've got," she said. He wondered what she kept it for, and she an old woman. "Tell me about

what you do in the city," she said when the maids had gone. Now, he thought, what if I said I work sometimes but not office hours, sometimes I get drunk, some afternoons I waste time. I often waste time, then I do some work. One cannot say that here any more than one can drive a car through that door—a car would not go through that door. "I've been working rather hard," he said.

"Do you make any money?"

"A little now and then. Living's expensive though."

"That depends on how you live. When I was your age I never took a cab: no one could have done what I have on what I have; no one could run this house on what I do. I don't like to see you sitting down to dinner in that old coat."

"It's a slow business," he said.

"You're thirty-four," his mother said, "Your name's in the newspapers. Why don't you live decently?" What she means is, Why have I not a salaried post, a fine English wife; why do I not figure at dinner parties and bring distinguished men here for visits? Why am I not wearing a dinner-jacket?

"But always remember," she said. "Always remember this, whenever you're in a scrape, no matter what it is, come to me. Don't let there be any barrier between us." This seemed a good moment, but he couldn't get the words out. She was smiling at him: "Give me your hand—just a little loving squeeze." I am thirty-four, he thought, and I must give a little loving squeeze.

"There's no barrier between us, is there? Sometimes I feel that you don't tell me everything. Why don't you tell me? I always know when you're unhappy: I'd always understand." This seemed a good moment; still he couldn't get the words out, so he sat holding the hard old hand.

"Come and give your old mother a kiss." She drew him with her hand, he kissed her cheek with dry lips.

"Things are very difficult," she said. "All alone in this house; I'm so lonely. And the servants are difficult. Six of them for me to manage. And the car laid up; I know they cheat me at the garage.

He looked over her head to the still life—game hanging in a cellar by a Chinese pot . . . fruits and vegetables stacked

below the game; at rich carpeted floors, shining magnificent polished boards, Adam mantelpieces, the leather-bound unread works of literature. The dozen empty rooms furnished with costly furniture, the servants chattering beyond the walls. His mother talked; troubles, griefs of neighbours that one must share. . . . How sad! What a pity! "And I had to," she said, "give five pounds for their whist-drive: people expect it of me." I am not bad, he thought; if I do not work so much, some of my work is good: my work will last after me. My work is good, this work lasts beyond solicitors' practices, and diplomatic careers; beyond widows' fortunes and country-houses. "So many calls on me," she said. For what? he thought. Five friends left at this advanced age; no contacts, no knowledge.

They went into the drawing-room: his mother stood up and arranged flowers on the mantelpiece. I must say it now without thinking, or it will not come out. "I am rather hard up," he said; his mother's hands stayed still on the flowers, her back was still, her head still, listening. "Rather short; I wondered if you would help me. I don't like to ask you," he said; "I am rather in debt, I owe some money. (It was £50.) I wouldn't ask you, but certain things have fallen through and the money is not coming in. I wondered if you could let me have (he dared not state the amount) some to be going on with."

He stopped; his mother stood still with her back to him, she said nothing. He was nervous. "Well?"

She turned quickly, dramatically, as she loved to do. "Well! Money! Debt! What do you expect? If you lived a steady life at a decent job: you have had every possible chance. You cast me down lower than I thought possible." She was growing angry. "After all I've done for you, how *dare* you come asking for money? In debt? *Debt!* And I was never in debt in my life! Slaving for you! What have you to show for it? Your work! Rot, I call it! I don't care if it is well known; what do decent people think of you? What's the use of it?"

He leaned back on the sofa with closed eyes: money changed her face, the poor lonely old woman who wanted a little loving squeeze at dinner, now snarled round her goods.

"Mine!" she cried. "Mine to do what I like with. How dare you assume that you have any claim on me?"

Now there is no barrier, he thought. Come to mother whenever you are in trouble; why am I not wearing a dinner-jacket?

After the luxury of abuse (one cannot abuse the servants like one's own son) comes the luxury of giving. The son has crawled in; he has the fame and the brains, but I have the money. She left the room wearing the face of a martyr, and went to her desk. She wrote him a cheque for £2 10s., then she reached for the bag with the six servants' wages in it, for one must run a house decently.

It will pay my fare back, he thought, and went up to bed in his old room. It was dark over the stables now, and the rooks had stopped their cawing.

#### NIGEL HESELTINE.

Born 1916. Welsh. Son of composer, Peter Warlock. Has published three novels. Edited *Wales*. Now manages own theatre company in Dublin.

# GUILT

by

## RONALD WILLETTS

THE countryside was flat, the hills few and far between, the horizon obscured by thin mist, faintly blue. The woods, no more than copses really, cowered anonymously in the hollows, or nakedly on the occasional heights, their outer trees scraggy and woebegone, as if to apologise for smearing the landscape at all. The road, built in gentler times, to link village and village, disregarding economy and the heart-thrust of an arterial highway, meandered through the levels. Along the road came the convoy, vehicle after vehicle, evenly spaced, evenly timed, a triumph of monotony, rolling to the coast.

The squat 15 cwt., No. 49, its brown tarpaulin tightly laced over picks and shovels, gun chests, ammunition, bombs, grenades, was running on the choke. Sandwiched between a troop-carrier and a cooks' lorry, Corporal Wright, the driver, had difficulty in keeping his interval. Blue smoke came from his exhaust with every jerky acceleration. He knew it, though he couldn't see it. He imagined the quarter-bloke's eyes fastened on it from the cooks' lorry, and felt uneasy. "The kind of thing he would notice, because it's none of his bloody business," he thought.

Then he smiled at his own rancour, changed gear, pulled on the choke, pressed it back half-way, and feeling the engine steadier, settled more comfortably in his seat. He took a quick glance at his No. 2. No. 2 was asleep, chin-strap turned over the front of his helmet, which rested on the back of his head, tilted slightly over his left ear; he clutched his rifle in both hands between his knees. He should have been alert, ready to jump out on to the roadside, if the convoy halted. He'd be pinched if anybody saw him. Corporal Wright put out his hand to shake him. He couldn't sleep himself, though the stuffiness in the cab made him feel limp. He had to shake

himself periodically or light a cigarette, He drew back his hand, thinking himself over-cautious. The soldier had been on guard all last night. Hell no! Risk it. Not much chance of a rest to-night either. They'd be moving in late.

He began once more to lay the ghost which had been troubling him all day. He tried to force himself to recall in some kind of logical sequence the events of the past few months. It was futile; like trying to keep a rubber ball under water with one finger. Your mind was like the finger, and the fresh, bouncing surface of the ball after every failure of control was like the facet of past events, compressed, cohesive, always likely to roll from beneath the surface, inviting the mind to renew the impossible. The Corporal, his square, attractive features too confidently set for his twenty-three years, as if he had had to persuade himself by some violent effort of his conviction, of his faith in life, in bewilderment renewed the impossible.

They had come away early that morning from the small city where they had been quartered since midsummer. Only yesterday he had been moving in familiar surroundings, along the streets, among the houses, which he had seen reflecting the haze of a late summer, the rain and frost of autumn and the beginning of winter. The trees along the wide, central avenue had been thick with green leaves, which had thinned gradually, revealing their sere shades of yellow and brown, fallen to the ground and then disappeared. Only that morning he had seen those trees in the half light, dripping with mist, stark, with a black sheen, like the black, wet sheen of the macadam road, which his shadowed head-lamps dimly revealed. Now, in the afternoon, how remote it seemed! He imagined the trees in the foliage of another summer, rooted to the same spot. If he ever returned, no matter at what season, he would know what to expect. The sight of the road chasing away under his wheels uncomfortably contrasted his own impermanence, his vagabondage. Yet by this time to-morrow, with all the assurance of vagabonds, they would have possessed another place, another atmosphere, moving with the same sense of immediacy in quite different surroundings. This deceptive assumption would put years between him and what he had left. He felt

the heavy tread of the inevitable change, and for a moment dreaded it, recognising his helplessness.

Yet such feelings were useless. The change, the impermanence, were imposed from without, facts to be accepted if life was not to become quite unbearable. And in that respect most of them were adaptable. The happy-go-lucky air, the jaunty hint of bravado soon caught on. But though they might be shunted hither and thither, outwardly self-contained in a separate compartment of existence, obedient to its own rigorous laws, the undercurrent of individual experience would not be stayed. The necessity for unfettered human contact was a more inexorable master than any exterior discipline. And with human contacts came the taste of the sweetness of freedom, arousing repressed desires, suggesting enormous, undefined possibilities, the brief, intense pleasure it bestowed making moods more complex and passions more uncertain. Human contacts brought the puzzle of conduct, of right and wrong, which could be delegated to no higher authority than oneself. Corporal Wright surrendered himself to regrets.

Two years ago it would have been impossible for him. But the war made casual acquaintanceships easy, overcharged the merest incidents with significance and tension, forced developments with a dramatist's economy. How many times had he been with her altogether? Five . . . six . . . seven. No more than seven. Then abruptly he had ceased, obeying a quixotic impulse such as had at first attracted him to her. She came to help in the canteen three times a week, on Monday, Wednesday and Friday, between 6 and 9 o'clock. So she had answered his first question, her eyes looking straight into his for an instant, as she passed the tea and toast he had ordered over the counter. He had come in early, and the only other customers, two R.A.F. sergeants, left almost as soon as he had given his order. Later the small room would be crowded, noisy with conversation and the piano, a bazaar of magazines, newspapers and tobacco smoke.

She was supporting herself against the wall, standing on one leg like a bird, the other slightly raised, toe just touching the ground. She was of medium height and slender, her

face pale and colourless, her hair black and straight, dressed so that it seemed to clip her face tightly below the ears. Which, with her marked pallor, brought into relief the lustre and vitality of her fine, dark eyes; they were quick and expressive, seeming to brim with life. As he looked at her, so still and lovely in repose, memory cheated him of pleasure.

The picture of tranquillity before him, the excitement those dark, lively eyes in the calm, white face aroused, by some fortuitous connection turned into its opposite, a picture of horror, a nightmare he suppressed. Etched in vivid detail he could almost see every brick of that village on the Fécamp-Le Havre road, though he had only passed through it on the single occasion, his swollen, blistered, aching feet dangling over the back of a truck. He saw the black pall in the sky from the burning oil-storage tanks outside the port, heard the distant concussion of the bombs, and then suddenly, as they turned the corner, felt the heat from the blazing, four-storeyed house. He was almost thrown off as the driver jammed on his brakes to avoid the shouting, gesticulating throng of villagers. Two gendarmes vainly tried to press them back to the pavement. Three ragged, dirty poilus stood in the gutter, immobile, transfixed, sweat pouring down their faces. He followed their eyes up to the top story window, to the three women jostling and screaming inside. Two sisters and a daughter they might have been. One looked mad already, the other two were nerveless with hysteria. The flames and smoke forced them back, and terror pressed them forward again. Escape was impossible. As the truck jerked into motion, he saw one of the poilus raise his rifle and begin to fire into the window. The crowd stood still, hushed. He had suddenly felt sick. He hoped the Frenchman was a good shot.

"More tea, please." She smiled, straightening up, stepping forward.

"Thirsty?"

"It's good tea," he said, half serious, half mocking, reacting to the present again. The picture of the ravaged French village receded, sinking to the grey oblivion of its ashes behind his mind. The yellow distempered walls of the canteen seemed all at once gay, the girl with the white face

and black hair and dancing eyes a Madonna of sweetness, the lodestone of desire. His blood raced. She was life.

His manner became easy, intimate, friendly. He was eager and aglow, riveting her attention. Then when he had caught her up in his mood, he listened to a story of her two brothers, home on leave together. One was a regular Guardsman, the other a conscript in a line regiment.

"They were both a bit tipsy on the last night, and Harry, why, he was thumping the table all through supper. 'Why,' he said, 'you lot couldn't beat pussy; why, you're only the makeweights.'"

She told it quaintly, affecting not to understand the issues of the argument at all, as if she had been observing the antics of strange creatures. Her soft voice racing on, her vivid asides, the punctuating "whys," made the domestic squabble fascinating. Her hearer was entranced.

He ought to have seen her again, he thought, just once at least, before they left.

How suddenly he had blown cold, not wanting to see her again, feeling no obligation. What did she think? After what—why, he could scarcely believe it. Without a word, without a by-your-leave. You could hardly catch up on what was happening to yourself, let alone the war and the world.

Nearly time for the halt. He woke the other soldier. The mist was closing, the air more chill. It would soon be dark. He was aware of a sense of loss. Vaguely he wondered what it was that he could have lost.

#### RONALD WILLETTTS.

Born 1915 in the Black Country. Was at Birmingham University shortly before the war. Now a subaltern in the Army.

# HAPPY AS THE DAY IS LONG

*by*

J. MACLAREN-ROSS

DIRECTLY I came into the shop I saw the Baron was pretty tight. The Baron had been trepanned and had a silver plate in his head. When this plate pressed on his skull and hurt him, he used to drink whisky to dull the pain. At these times he always got tight.

He was a little man with a wrinkled yellow face and supposed to be French, though he spoke English with an Italian accent. He was a dealer in antiques and the shop belonged to him.

When he saw me come in, he staggered forward a few paces, almost overturning the oil-stove that stood in the middle of the floor, and shouted, "Hey, you rascal! Why you not been to see me, hey?"

He swayed to and fro, keeping his balance by clutching the edge of an antique table. He was wearing a long blue overcoat with a velvet collar. He slammed me hard on the back with his hand and shouted again, "Why you not been to see me? Where you been hiding, hey?"

"I've been ill," I told him.

"Hey? Ill? Oh, I am so sorry." The Baron's manner changed. He lowered his voice and, putting his hand on my shoulder, said, "I am so very sorry. But you are better now, yes?"

"Yes," I said, "I'm better now."

The Baron's eyes filled with tears. "I am so glad," he said. "I am so very glad."

There were other people in the shop besides the Baron. These included "Mrs. Neville-Stanforth and the Baron's secretary, a small woman who wore a green hat. A middle-

aged man whom I didn't know was sitting quietly on a chair in the corner, smiling to himself.

Mrs. Neville-Stanforth said, "Hallo, Sylvester! All right again now?"

"Yes, thanks," I said.

"No contagion or anything?"

"Not now."

I shook hands with the Baron's secretary. She stood behind a table with cakes and cups upon it. There was also a bottle of Scotch, half empty, and some glasses. The Baron came forward suddenly and said to me, "I am so glad to see you, my dear friend." He flung out his hand towards the table and shouted at his secretary, "Give the boy a drink, no?"

"I was just going to, monsieur."

The Baron glared at her fiercely. Mrs. Neville-Stanforth said, "Hadn't you better sit down, my dear?"

"Sit down?" the Baron said. "What for I sit down? You tink I cannot stand? You tink I am trunk?"

"No, no, of course I don't think you're drunk."

"I am not trunk," the Baron said with dignity. He pointed suddenly at the man in the corner and shouted, "Why for you grin? You tink I am funny, yes?"

"I think you're very funny," the man in the corner said with a chuckle. His voice was low and rather husky.

"He tinks I am funny!" the Baron said, turning indignantly to me. "You do not tink I am funny, no?"

"That's all right, old chap," the man in the corner said. "Just you sit down and don't worry your head."

"Sit down! Sit down! Why can I not stand, hey?"

"Don't ask me, old chap," the other man said. "Ask yourself."

I took the drink the secretary held out to me and sat down by the table.

"Would you like some cake?" the secretary said.

"Thanks," I said. "Just a slice."

I took the cake and started to munch it. I hadn't had anything much to eat all day and the cake tasted good. I was glad I'd called on the Baron: when you're down to your last ten bob, a free meal and drink isn't to be sneezed at. It

was difficult, though, having to eat the cake as if I wasn't really hungry.

Outside, in the King's Road, Chelsea, it was raw and cold and the cold came in through the half-open door from the street outside. The oil-stove didn't do much about heating unless you actually sat on it.

"Will you have another slice of cake?" the secretary said.

"Yes, I think I will, thanks."

Mrs. Neville-Stanforth had at last persuaded the Baron to sit down. He sat astride a hard chair with his arms leaning on the back of it, as though riding a horse.

"What about that job you were after?" Mrs. Neville-Stanforth said. "The one with Hatrix, I mean. Did you manage to get it?"

"No," I said.

"Do you know Hatrix, then?" the man in the corner asked me.

"I've met him once or twice."

The man in the corner chuckled.

"I know Hatrix," the Baron said. "He is a rascal, that one."

"I'm sorry you didn't get the job," Mrs. Neville-Stanforth said.

"So am I," I said. "Very sorry." I finished off the glass of whisky.

"I understood it was all settled," Mrs. Neville-Stanforth said. "I thought he'd practically given you the job."

"So he had," I told her. "But I got ill, you see. I was in bed three weeks, and when I got up I found he'd given the job to someone else."

"He is a rascal, that Hatrix," the Baron said.

"Of course I couldn't expect him to wait for ever," I said.

"What was the job?" the man in the corner asked.

"Painting decorative panels for one of his houses."

The door came open and two ladies walked into the shop. A blast of cold air came in with them and the flame of the oil-stove shot up with a humming sound. The Baron sprang to his feet. He became entangled in the legs of the chair and finally it fell over and he kicked it out of his way. He

staggered across to the two ladies, who were looking rather surprised.

"Yes?" he said in a menacing manner. "Yes?"

One of the ladies looked wildly around and picked up a vase, at random.

"How much is this, please?" she said.

"That?". The Baron took the vase from her and looked at it, holding it at arm's length away from him. "That is tree guineas! Tree!"

He shook the vase at her and glared menacingly. "Tree!" he shouted again.

For a moment it seemed as if the lady would be stampeded into buying the vase, but her companion showed more presence of mind.

"No," she said firmly. "That is too expensive. Thank you very much."

"Tree guineas!" the Baron shouted, waving the vase after them as they hurried out.

The Baron's secretary bent forward and picked up the overturned chair. "Oh dear, oh dear," she said. She was very distressed.

Mrs. Neville-Stanforth said in an undertone to the man in the corner, "Can't you get him out of here? He'll drive everyone away in his present state."

"Leave it to me," the man said.

The Baron closed the shop door with a great deal of noise. He then replaced the vase on the table where it stood. He said, "All day they come in here, they look round, they buy nossing. I am sick of such peoples. They are no good. I tell to them 'Get out' if they will not buy. So!"

He came back to the table and stood swaying unsteadily. I reached out and took the last piece of cake from the plate. I was still damned hungry.

The Baron's secretary said, "Oh, I'm so sorry. I didn't offer you . . . Will you have another drink?"

"Thank you, I will."

"That is right," the Baron said. "I am pleased you are here, my friend." He patted me on the shoulder and grinned. "I too will have another drink, hey?"

"Come and have one in the pub," the man in the corner said. "That bottle's nearly empty."

"Alas," the Baron said, "I cannot leave the shop."

"I'll look after the shop if you like, monsieur," the secretary said, trying not to sound too eager.

"No," the Baron said, "I must remain here myself in person."

"Come on, old chap," the man in the corner said. "Be a sport. We'll only be gone a few minutes."

I finished the cake and my second drink and held out my hands to the stove. It wasn't so cold with the door shut but the stove didn't give out much heat.

"I consent on one condition," the Baron said. "That my dear friend here"—he patted my shoulder—"come also with us. Yes?"

"Will you come along?" the man in the corner asked me.

"Yes, I'll come."

"There you are," the man in the corner said.

"Wait just one moment," the Baron said. He tipped the last of the bottle into his glass and drank it off neat. Then he said, "So!"

"All set?" the man in the corner said. He rose to his feet.

The Baron looked at his secretary. "You will see after the shop?"

"Yes, monsieur."

The Baron started to give her minute instructions regarding the prices of certain valuable antiques on sale in the shop.

"Come on," the other man said. "Don't be all night about it."

"Yes, yes, I come," the Baron said.

"Good-bye, my dear," Mrs. Neville-Stanforth said to me.

"Good-bye," I said.

"I come back soon," the Baron said, turning at the door. The other man seized his arm and hustled him out. It was bitter cold in the street and the sky was smoky and reddish from the reflected glare of neon signs. The Baron linked his other arm in mine and we crossed the road; the pub was on the opposite side. The landlord was just opening the side door into the saloon-bar when we got there.

"Well, well," the landlord said, "You're on time, you are. And no mistake."

Evidently the Baron and the other man were well known to him.

"It's gone five, Joe," the other man said, looking at his watch.

"Only just," Joe said. We followed him into the saloon; it was warm and cosy inside. The landlord switched on the lights and went behind the bar. The Baron rapped on the counter with a coin.

"What you trink, hey?" he asked us.

"Whisky," we both said.

"And me also," the Baron said.

"White Horse, Haig, Johnny Walker, or Black and White?" Joe said.

"It's no matter," the Baron said. "They are all whisky, yes?"

"I'll have White Horse," the other man said. "Because you can tell it blindfold."

"And you, sir?" Joe asked.

"I'll have Irish," I said.

"Are you an Irishman?" the other man asked me.

"No," I said. "Not particularly. Why?"

"I thought I'd discovered a fellow-countryman," the other said.

"Are you Irish, then?"

"Sure I am," the other said. "I come from Dublin. My name is Casey."

"Not so!" the Baron said, banging on the counter. "You are not Irish. You are a Jew!" He said to me, "Do not believe this man. Always he tell he is Irish but it is not so. He is an old Jew!"

"That's right," the other said good-humouredly. "I am a Polish Jew. I come from Warsaw."

"Why for you tell you are Irish, then?" the Baron asked him belligerently.

Joe put the drinks on the counter and watched us with a grin.

"This man is a Jew!" the Baron told him. "A Polish Jew!"

"That's right," the other said, winking at Joe.

"Do not believe when he tell he is Irish," the Baron said.

"It is a lie!"

"Well, cheerio," the other said, picking up his glass.

"A la vôtre," I said to the Baron.

"Cherry-o," the Baron said with dignity.

I had never been able to persuade him to talk French with me. He sat there in his velvet-collared coat, his wrinkled yellow face looking almost Asiatic. It was impossible to guess at his true nationality. He was a very small man and his legs dangled short of the ground as he sat up on the high stool at the counter, lifting his glass solemnly to each of us in turn.

"You know," the other man said to me in his husky, confidential voice, "I'm not really a Jew. That's just his joke. I'm an Irishman from Dublin. My name's Casey." He put a hand in his pocket and produced a card with TIM CASEY engraved on it in big letters. "You see?" he said.

I took the card and looked at it. Underneath the name Tim Casey was inscribed the address of a firm of interior decorators.

"So you're in the same line as Hatrix," I said.

"That's right," Tim Casey said, leaning back against the bar. He said, "I'm pretty well known in the trade. Ask any one you meet if they've heard of Tim Casey. They'll tell you. By God, I've lost a fortune over Art, I have."

"Is that so?"

"It's been my ruin," Casey said. "Are you an artist?"

"Yes," I said. "A painter."

"There's no money in Art," Casey said.

"Don't I know it."

"I'll bet you do," Casey said, chuckling. "Hatrix, now, *he* makes it pay. He's a business man. I'm not. I haven't the head for it. We Irish rarely make good business men. We're too simple. Too free and easy."

I finished my whisky, wondering how I could pay for the drinks when it came to my round. I only had a ten-bob note left, and that had to last till the end of the month, when I got my usual cheque from home. There was a calendar up

behind the counter, advertising a brand of cider. The date was February 15th.

"Same again?" Casey said, looking at my empty glass.

"Thank you," I said.

"I'm hungry," Casey said. "I want something to eat. Will you have something too?"

"All right."•

Casey turned to the barman. "Let's have some sandwiches, Joe," he said.

"Cheese, ham, or tongue?" Joe said, taking a plate from out of a glass case.

"Ham, I think," Casey said. "What about you?"

"All right," I said.

Casey looked at the Baron, who hadn't spoken for some time. He sat huddled on his stool, holding his head in his hands.

Casey said, "Same again, old chap?"

The Baron just nodded, dully.

"What's the matter?" Casey asked him. "Feeling blue?"

"I have pains," the Baron said. "Pains in my head."

"A spot of whisky'll soon put them right," Casey said. "Have a ham sandwich too."

"No," said the Baron.

"Come on. It'll do your pains good."

"You tink so?"

"I'm sure of it, old chap."

"Ver' well. I will have a ham."

"Three ham sandwiches," Casey said to Joe. "Here you are," he said to the Baron. "Get outside that. You'll soon feel good again."

"Tank you," the Baron said gravely. He took a bite of the sandwich and a gulp of whisky. He said, "You are a Jew but you are generous. You have pay for my drink. So!"

"That's right," Casey said. "We Polish Jews are always generous." He winked at me as he said it.

"You are a generous Jew," the Baron said.

"You bet I am." Casey winked again. "That's just his joke," he explained to me huskily.

I nodded, eating my sandwich. I was wondering if I could

perhaps touch Casey for a quid. Of course if the worst came to the worst there was always Fleurette, but I didn't want to go to her. We'd had the hell of a row just before I got ill and it would take a lot of getting over. Besides, I hate borrowing money from women, because they never let you forget it. Especially Fleurette.

So I considered Casey. He might have been a Jew or again he might not. You couldn't tell from his face; there are plenty of Irishmen with thick noses.

"Have another sandwich," he said, pushing the plate over towards me.

"Thanks, I will."

"Do," Casey said. "It's on me."

Joe went along behind the counter and switched on the radio; it played a syncopated tune.

"Are you fond of music?" Casey said.

"Do you mean dance music?" I said.

"No, real music."

"Yes," I said. "Are you?"

"And then some," Casey said. "You mightn't believe it, but I had a great career ahead of me once, as a singer."

"Really?"

"Yes," Casey said. "I had a beautiful voice. Really beautiful."

"What happened?"

"The war," Casey said. "I was gassed. Now I can't sing a note. Not a bloody note."

"I say, what rotten luck."

"It was," Casey said. "I'd have been a great singer if it wasn't for that war."

"What was your register?"

"Tenor," Casey said. "I'd have been a great Irish tenor. Like Count MacCormack."

"Or Jack Doyle."

"That's right."

"Did you ever meet James Joyce in Dublin?"

"No. Who's he?"

"Another Irish tenor."

"I never met him," Casey said. He shook his head. "Ah, if I could only be young again. I'd give all the money I've

got in the world if I could be your age, with your opportunities. I'd be happy as the day is long."

"Would you?"

"By God I would," Casey said. "You don't know how lucky you are."

"No," I said. "You're right about that."

"How old are you, if you'll pardon me asking a personal question?"

"I'm twenty-six."

"Twenty-six!" Casey said. "Twenty-six! I'd give every penny I possess to change places with you. To be young and carefree and happy again."

"How d'you know I'm carefree and happy?"

"If you're not you ought to be," Casey said. "You've got all the world before you. What more do you want?"

"Lots of things."

"Such as?"

"Well, money, for one."

"Ah, that's a thing we all want," Casey said. "But remember, money can't buy happiness."

"It could for me at the moment."

"You can make money," Casey said.

"How? You say yourself that there isn't any in Art."

"No, that's true," Casey said. "But there're other ways of making money. If I were you, if I had my life to live over again, I should chuck Art. Believe me, it doesn't pay, and I'm one who knows." RID. 00069051

"So am I."

"There you are, then. Why not give it up? Become a bank manager or something."

"That's not so easy, either."

"Everything's easy if one's got youth," Casey said. "Look at me. I'm over fifty. The best part of my life's behind me. But what couldn't I do if I were twenty-six again? Eh? I ask you that."

I couldn't think of an answer off-hand, and Casey continued, "When I was twenty-six I had everything: youth, health, strength, the promise of a great future. I was handsome too. Look at me now and you can just imagine what I was like then. Eh?"

I looked at him. There was nothing about his appearance to indicate that he had ever been good-looking, but I nodded, for the sake of politeness.

"I tell you, I had everything," Casey said. "Now I have nothing. All gone. Youth's a stuff will not endure." He took off his hat and I saw then that he was completely bald. Bald as a coot. He passed a hand over his head and said, "I had thick curly hair once, as thick as yours. Now even that's gone and I have only memories to look back upon." He shook his head sadly; he looked more like a Jew with his hat off. He said, "In Dublin they used to call me the Tiger."

"Why?"

"It was a tribute. A tribute to my youth and strength."

"I see."

The radio behind the bar continued to play dance music. The Baron sat huddled on his stool, staring vacantly into space. Joe was leaning on the counter, reading the sporting page of an evening paper.

Casey said, "I'm telling you all this so that you'll realise what it means to waste one's opportunities. I've sacrificed myself in the service of Art. See that you don't make the same mistake. You're young and healthy: take time by the forelock. Go in and win."

"Meantime I've only ten bob in my pocket."

"Ten bob?"

"That's all."

A subtle change came over Casey's face. He suddenly looked very shrewd. He said, "Ten bob isn't much, certainly."

"It's got to last till the end of the month."

"What's the date to-day?"

"The fifteenth."

"Oh, that's not so bad," Casey said.

"It's pretty bad. Thirteen days."

"Time passes quickly when one is young. The end of the month'll be here before you know it."

"So will the end of the money."

"It'll last you," Casey said with conviction.

"How d'you know it will?"

"I'm certain," Casey said. "I've got a feeling it will. We Irish get these feelings, you know, and we're usually right."

"Are you?"

"Nearly always."

"That's a comfort, anyway."

"It'll last if you're careful," Casey said. "If you don't go throwing it away. That's always been my trouble: generosity. Chucking money about like water." He turned to the Baron. "How are you feeling now?"

The Baron shook his head dully.

"Pains bad?"

The Baron nodded.

"Never mind. Have another drink. You'll feel better then." He turned to me. "Like another?"

"Thanks."

"Same again all round," Casey told Joe.

I said, "I suppose you haven't any jobs vacant in your firm?"

Casey looked at me shrewdly, rubbing a hand over his head. "No, I'm afraid not, old chap," he said. "Of course if I hear of anything . . ."

"Of course," I said.

"Well, cheerio," Casey said.

"Cheerio."

The Baron lifted his glass and gulped the whisky down.

"Better?" Casey asked him.

"No," said the Baron.

"Cheer up," Casey said. "You'll be all right again to-morrow."

"You tink so?"

"I'm sure," Casey said.

"Have you got a feeling about it?" I asked him.

"Yes," Casey said.

"That's all right, then," I told the Baron. "The Irish are always right about these things."

"I'll say we are," Casey said.

The Baron said, "What is the time, please?"

"Nearly six," Casey said, looking at the clock.

"I must return to the shop," the Baron said. He got down off the high stool. His movements were still unsteady but he was much more subdued; his pains seemed to have sobered him a lot.

"Righty-ho," Casey said, putting on his hat.

"Good-night, gentlemen," Joe said.

"I'll be back, Joe," Casey said.

"I bet you will, sir," Joe said.

We all went towards the door.

"Wait a sec," Casey said. He stopped in front of a fruit machine that stood near the door. He said, "I must try my luck with this. We Irish are like that, you know; we can't resist a gamble."

He put a sixpence in the slot and pulled the lever; the machine whirred and the numbers clicked into place: 1-3-5. "Damn the thing," Casey said. He put another sixpence in, without success. He put in four sixpences altogether but did not win anything at all. Then he turned to me. "Now you put one in."

"I can't afford to."

Casey took a sixpence from his pocket and handed it to me. "Here you are," he said. "Go on. You can pay it back at the end of the month." He chuckled.

I put the sixpence in and pulled the lever. 1-5-5 turned up.

"No luck," Casey said. "Never mind."

He opened the door and we went out into the street where it was still bitter cold. The Baron turned to me and held out his hand. "I'm glad you come to see me, my friend. You come again, hey?"

"Certainly."

"Soon?"

"Soon. And I hope your head gets better quickly."

"Thank you," the Baron said. "You are kind."

In the dim smoky light of the street his face looked yellow and strained but he was almost sober now.

"So long, old chap," Casey said to me. "Look in some time, you've got my card. If there are any jobs vacant . . ."

"Yes. And I can pay you back that sixpence."

"Don't worry about that," Casey said. He waved his hand. "And remember"—he tapped my chest lightly with his finger—"you've got youth, and that's everything. Money doesn't matter when you've got that. Take it from me. I'm one who knows."

"So long," I said.

Casey took the Baron's arm and they crossed the road to the shop. I turned up my coat collar and started to walk away down the King's Road, past the cinemas, the tobacconists, and the cheap confectioners, wondering what I should do next. It was damned cold; I could feel it right through my gloves and overcoat. There was only one thing to do: ring-up Eleurette. She'd come across in time, when we'd patched up that row. Walking along, feeling the cold, I cursed Casey for a stingy swine. Still, I'd had two sandwiches and three drinks out of him, and that was something, even if I had had to listen to his bloody nonsense about youth and health and money not mattering.

It was all very fine for him to talk, but money *can* buy happiness when you haven't got any. It could buy happiness for me right now, at this very moment.

I turned into the square where the telephone-boxes stood. I went into one of the boxes and the glass door shut out the cold behind me. I stopped, looking at the telephone, thinking. Curse him, curse him for a mean goddamned swine. Then I picked up the phone and dialled Mayfair one-six-double-o.

#### J. MACLAREN-ROSS.

Was educated and brought up on French Riviera. During period of financial depression sold vacuum cleaners, became leading salesman for a week, then threw the job in. Now works in an Army Orderly Room. A short story by him was in *English Story: Second Series*.

# SWING BOITE

by  
VIVIAN CONNELL

**U**P in sky Trappist moon in Golden Harem of stars Gothic Neanderthal of Notre-Dame. Euclids caught in Eiffel web. Needle in Place de la Concorde magnetic to Mars.

Shaft of light slammed on pavement. Question screeched from bright mouth of doorway.

*What is a sardine?*

Commissionnaire Nubian purple smile on Ozymandias bones coat in Solomon's blood nine gold buttons dropped from sky drums of oil in baritone.

Dancing Monsieur Le Dancing.

Go in MacGillicoddy go in. Consider the sluggard and be wise.

*What is a sardine?*

Question pistoned out of trumpet straight at eyes in braking light. Shade beyond in Caribbean palms and Gauguin walls. Dark Gouaches haunting shadows in hinterland of jitterbugging lights glasses rippling on tables jewels shivering in tropical hysteria and eyes like basilisks in holes counterpoised on La Mou. Venus de Milo in Nubian gold La Mou standing an arm lost behind purple curtain. Siberian eyes hungry on golden Polynesian meat and hunting in golden Capricorn of loins. Throb throb throb the interrogating drum.

*What is a sardine?*

Dogmatic little heads wagging abNordically in tune. Dolichocephalic swing. All one gregarious skull. Individual egos hung up in vestiare. Lean old roué from Fontainebleau face a grey chateau wants to rebuild it under La Mou's golden hills. Merchant's wife bediamonded stones of Troy on a shop bosom white dough kneadless needing La Mou. Tightpurse Bourse millionaire mousetrap mouth teeth

clicking on La Mou like tapemachine. Marquis one eye red button in lapel no eye for second red button on La Mou. Bodies agitated gymnastically but all eyes one mood stationary on La Mou. Let her move and all Lamas move in all eyes. Tongues squabbling like harem girls busy in deshabille of lights but communal Eye silent in monastery of Gauguin shadowed around La Mou. O lumière d'Atlantis in eyes of absinthe—

Absinthe, O MacGillicoddy, absinthe, and drop a coral reef in the glass!

*What is a sardine?*

Pete breaking it up. A sunset like a broken egg yolk on the molars of Arizona. Under the yellow lava the lost de Milo arm. Pete throwing the question to Harryboy on the piano.

*What is a sardine?*

And those ivory keys the fingers of the lost de Milo arm? But

I don't care for nobody's arm  
 I'm out where the night is warm  
 I'm out walking with a dream  
 I'm out gazing at the stars  
 So what the hell is a sardine  
 If one up there is Venus  
 And one is Norma Shearer.

Break it up, Boys! Let it go! Let it go hooves high-kicking till Notre-Dame is busted over. Break it up, Boys! All break it up, Pete, Joyce, Louis Armstrong. Dali, Lenin, Picasso. Jam session. Crockery shop. Balkans.

Make a pome MacGillicoddy make a pome!

#### POME

Satchmo his trumpet's like the cock o' dawn  
 Far red comb shrieking like a klaxon  
 Blown by God's cops to wake the drowsed  
 Dumb niggers out o' the black limelight  
 O' Death's cigar smoke hangin' over  
 The bald paper domes o' Wall Street.

I'd say his trumpet states  
 That hot into the belly o' the white bitch dying  
 The negroid piston's driving.

*Interval for subluminous sound*  
*O ages before the saxophone had rumoured*  
*The gorilla crooning at a bodice understood*  
*A lunar sympathy in dirigible moons.*

I'd say his trumpet states  
 G-men jam into the stomach o' the sick Chicago  
 The sawed-off branch Anthropos.

*Interruption by the drums*  
*The nigger's gob by God's hoof stamped*  
*Whose fists beat on the moon*  
*The nigger's gob by God's hoof stamped*  
*Was beaten into tune.*

I'd say his trumpet states  
 That all the jiggin' diamond lights o' Babylon  
 Are bits o' Broadway crockery.

Satchmo his trumpet's like the screaming pencil  
 Figurin' on the business chart the fever  
 High into the stratosphere o' dream  
 That makes the handwriting o' the skyscrapers  
 In Esperanto on the ceiling  
 The new Biblical text of America.

*What is a sardine?*

Tom tom tom Old Gorilla on his tum. Tock tock tock  
 Old Granpa in his clock. Suddenly Big Ben clanging in  
 shadow behind turtledoving saxophone and echoing along  
 green flats of palm. Guardee lost in Harlem long scything  
 English walk looking for table. Only white God among  
 the natives old boy Methuselah from Eton colonizing tracts  
 Freudian jungle for Victoria and Albert immemorial.

*In long iambic strides along St. James*  
*Lear goes into his club Hamlet into his beard.*

Poule ming, or porcelain young pink face old black  
 European legs reflexes him bony knee at Bar and Monsieur  
 L'Anglais pays la consommation his desires a prix fixe.

*What is a sardine?*

Garçon, un verre plus grand. . . .

In the bottom of a glass of absinthe is a sardine O MacGillicoddy. In the bottom of a pail of absinthe is a herring O MacGillicoddy. In the bottom of a sea of absinthe is a whale O MacGillicoddy. In Atlantis he swims carrying the golden arm in his mouth. After him swim the herrings of the Bourse. Only the sardine lies in the pond of absinthe. Has she returned unto Greece or Rome the de Milo arm? . . .

Monsieur ne rien voit que cette jeune Polynéz hue qui se pose comme une statue d'or?

Non, Mamozelle. Je ne rien vois que son bras caché derriere le rideau au fond du monde.

Monsieur perds le temps. On peut bien s'amuser chez moi . . .

Mamozelle, le rideau se leve soudainement au moment que Jonas ouvre sa bouche pour engouffrer la baleine.

La baleine, Monsieur?

Oui, Mamozelle, le baleine qui nage dans mon verre. Moi, vous comprenez, je suis Jonah . . .

Monsieur m'excuse . . . Je vois justement une de mes amies au Bar.

How tiny is the bottom of Paris on a chair! How empty is the chair. Elle n'occupe le chair . . .

*What is a sardine?*

Whale out of my glass! Garçon . . .

Poet dark Nor-westerling hair nose his promontory dividing Sea now platinum blonde at elbow his eyes contemplating down long corridors of Time La Mou. Ah yes I remember. By the pier at Elsinore. Name was Hamlet . . . Oui, encore une absinthe . . . Malmsey it was and Rhenish then.

*What is a sardine?*

From Elsinore coated in Cleopatra's oil he swam in the wake of that sardine. Ah Hamlet how your cannibal soul gorged in the Abyssinia of her black hair and gluttoned in the Red Nile of her blood! Ah within the Ethiopian dark the incarnadined Niagara of love! Drowned, drowned in the golden lava of Egypt! And then old Shakespeare wintered you off with this pale Ophelia. Alas poor ghost . . .

*What is a sardine?*

What . . . I've got it! By all the rolling roystering blood-drunken Druids of Stonehenge, I've got it now, young Denmark! A sardine is the lost arm of the Venus de Milo!

At last she moves and all Lamas move in all eyes.

MacGillicoddy! MacGillicoddy! Where have you gone?  
Back into the penumbra, the Polynesian gloom, the Nubian glow, behind the Curtain!

Blow, Trumpeter, blow!

VIVIAN CONNELL.

Irish, born in Co. Cork. Never been to a school. Has published two novels and a play, *Throng O' Scarlet*, which was highly praised by James Agate. Interested in modern painting and swing music.

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## THE SHRINE

*by*

ELIZABETH BERRIDGE

MRS. BAGOT died on a Saturday, half-dressed to take the children to Box Hill. It was a day of blazing gorse and hot petrol fumes, and the children waited, hanging stork-like on the gate.

But in the bedroom, heavy with June and cosmetic scent, Mrs. Bagot lay across the bed, powder-puff loose in one plump white hand, mouth half-open in a cry never to be heard.

The picnic baskets were packed and ready, the children restless for hot cropped hillsides, dwarf hawthorn trees and paper-wrapped ice-cream. All they needed was a foot on the starter of the old Ford. But Mrs. Bagot's foot hung limp over a quilted eiderdown. It had never swung in death.

It was Tich who found her. Tich, her middle daughter, and the only person who hated her. Standing in the doorway, she looked upon that flaccid form on the bed and felt no pity, no horror, nothing. Tich was twelve years old and had hated her mother for a week.

She ran, white-faced, to Annie, the old maid-servant, and found her grumbling her way up the cellar steps. She stood, and cried out sharply, "Annie—Mother's . . ." Even now her mind hadn't grasped the meaning of the quiet hand, the half-open mouth. She broke into short sobs. "Annie—and we were going to Box Hill!"

The week of hate fell away, and a burning loss, an aching love filled and confounded her.

Last Sunday a little pale-faced girl had sat in a sunny corner of the drawing-room, a violin lying unheeded in her arms. Her face was turned towards her mother, seated at the grand piano. Fascinated, she watched the piano-stool give to the large body as it swayed in the wake of the flying plump fingers. The melody flowed through the room, into the garden and was lost among the lime-trees at the farthest fence.

But to the little girl the melody did not come as a whole —a cadence. She was only too conscious of the procession of single notes, each one pressed down so fleetingly, yet with unfailing accuracy.

Abruptly the fingers stopped, poised a moment as if listening to the echo of the music, and then were by her mother's side again.

Mrs. Bagot turned, her full mobile face unusually flushed with the exertion. Tich waited, clutching the violin to her anxiously. She half-feared and yet prayed for her mother to ask her to come now and try the melody over with her. But Mrs. Bagot looked across the room to where another piano stood. It was small, and had been brought down from the nursery only yesterday. A tiny girl, not more than eight years old, sat before the keyboard, the sun on her crisp gold hair and hands poised ready.

"Try that now, Daphne," Mrs. Bagot said. "You must get more *feeling* into your playing. Music without emotion

is like a fairground without a merry-go-round. See what you can do with it."

Daphne had only been waiting for her mother to stop speaking, and with eyes fixed on the sheet propped in front of her, plunged into the melody.

Tich's disappointment gave way to a sudden daring, and standing up quietly she put the violin to her chin and started swiftly to accompany her sister. The notes she drew from the instrument were pure and correct, but she had not played a dozen bars when Daphne, who had been frowning at the accompaniment, stopped.

"Mother!" she said pettishly, "I can't possibly go on with Tich scraping there. She's only doing it to put me off!"

Mrs. Bagot looked at her daughters. Tich, entering into the legginess of early adolescence, stood on one foot nervously, her eyes entreating. Daphne, her little rounded face set in resentment, saw her mother hesitate.

"Send her away, Mother—we haven't done half the practising I need." She looked at her sister, knowing she would triumph.

"Well, Tich, just let little Daffie finish this piece, then I'll play something for you." So Tich sat down again, while Daphne, with a pleased wriggle of her shoulder, started playing again.

Mrs. Bagot had forgotten her promise by the time her youngest daughter had finished, and insisted on going over it with her time and time again, while Tich sat, disregarded, in her corner. Gazing into the garden, her finger twanged a string by mistake, and this time it was her mother who turned on her.

"Tich!" Mrs. Bagot's voice was edged with annoyance. "Don't you *want* your sister to be a great pianist? How selfish you are!"

Tich stroked her violin. No, she didn't want Daffie to be a great pianist. She hoped with all her heart she would never give recitals as her mother had done. Obscurely she felt Daffie was too *mean* to be really great. There was nothing generous about her playing. All Tich wanted was her mother to play while she accompanied her on the violin, and watched those incredibly lithe fingers nimbling over the notes. But

all this she couldn't say, and Mrs. Bagot, controlling herself, said consolingly, "We'll have a nice little tea in the garden when Tina comes in. Go and tell Millie to set the table under the tree."

Tich got up slowly and put her violin away. She dare not broach the subject again, for the thing she feared most was her mother's quick and rending temper. The raised hand and shrill voice had terrible power over her.

She wandered from the kitchen into the garden, and pushed herself slowly backwards and forwards on the swing; one long leg acting as lever. What could she do to make her mother look at her and smile as she did at Daphne? Why wasn't she taken round to friends, and made to play for them?

Idly she watched Millie cross the lawn with the tea-tray. Then she had an idea. Waiting until Millie returned to the kitchen, she slipped along to the peony bed, and selecting the largest and most vivid bloom, broke it off and hid it under her dress. The sound of the two pianos came from the drawing-room, miraculously blending, and the front door slammed, bringing Tina's gay voice into the house.

Slipping over to the tea table, Tich carefully laid the flower by her mother's plate. The petals looked rich and sensuous against the cream china.

But as Mrs. Bagot and the three girls assembled round the table for tea, Mrs. Bagot turned to Daphne and said, "You can be mother to-day, Daffie. Be careful with the pot." She had not seen the flower by the plate, so it was left for Daphne to pick up. She preened herself with it against her hair, and looking a little smugly round at the others, said, "My first bouquet. What do I say, Mother?"

Tina saw Tich flush and start forward. She put a restraining hand on her knee and took the flower from Daphne.

"Don't be silly, Daffs," she said sharply. "It's for Mother. Isn't it, Tich?"

Mrs. Bagot was touched. She took up the peony and held it to her cheek, smiling at Tich. There was a moment's silence.

"Why, you're lovely, Mother!" said Tina suddenly, and for a moment all three children gazed at her in awe. The

cumbersome body was no longer there for them—only glowing smoothness held against a pale cheek. Her Spanish origin was very apparent now. Then Daphne broke the tense silence.

"Daddy doesn't like the flowers to be picked," she said. "He's sure to notice and he'll be home next week."

The mention of their father brought them back to tea in the garden, white summer butterflies. Mrs. Bagot pinned the peony to her dress, remarking casually, "Why, so he will. Won't that be nice?" Her tone was suddenly flat, and she turned to Tina with a question about the evening. She was expected at the local choral society. The people there loved her, and she felt at home. Her talent was recognised, and she knew none of them would achieve what she had. They were pleased with her vitality, her laugh and stringent tongue, her willingness to drive them home.

By the evening everyone had forgotten about the incident at tea except Tich. She knew what revenge she would take on Daphne, and she hugged it to herself as she waited, shivering, on the cold stairs outside the bedroom her sister shared with her mother. Millie was in bed, there was no one about.

Lifting her hand in the darkness, she rapped on the door three times, slowly—one, two, three. There was a startled scuffle from inside, a faint shriek, and Daphne's imploring voice:

"No, Tich, no! Don't!" But her sister's voice came from the blackness, deep and inexorable. "This is Mr. Hyde. Let me in." Here she gave a terrifying laugh, half gurgle, half neigh, and went on: "Or I'll be the monkey's paw. Listen. Drip—drip—drip . . ." Slowly she turned the handle and with a quick jerk opened the door, which Daphne had in vain been trying to lock against her. She followed her sister as she retreated towards the bed, face covered, and flapped cold hands at her.

She came near and whispered in unbearable tones: "I'm dead. Can you smell the churchyard mould?" Her eyes rolled up, showing the whites only. Her voice rose and went on in a rush. ". . . and I've come to take selfish show-offs to hell!"

She stopped, herself thoroughly frightened.

Daphne looked at her, and suddenly sprang for the bed, breaking into terrified screams, which quickly became gulping hysteria.

Tich stood a moment, uncertain; then she heard footsteps on the stairs and darted for the door. She ran so fast that only when she was in bed, rigid beneath the clothes, did she hear her mother's voice in the room below, repeatedly asking, in sharp quick tones: "What is it? What is it? For the love of God, Daphne . . ."

She lay very still, feigning sleep. Then she heard rapid footsteps approaching her room. The door was thrown open. There was a terrible constrained silence about Mrs. Bagot as she entered, and involuntarily Tich stopped breathing.

Her mother stood by the bed. In her hand was a hairbrush, quickly snatched up.

"Get out of bed," she said with quiet venom. Then her face flushed and her voice rose to a shout. "Get out, I say!"

She looked at Tich lying there, watching with large arrested eyes, then she pulled back the clothes and brought the hairbrush down, bristles foremost. Tich cried out sharply, fear and amazement clogging further sound, and Mrs. Bagot, all her rage expiring in that one blow, covered her again. She returned to the door, trembling. Then she faced the bed.

"Daphne is the only one of you to show any talent whatsoever," she said. "She will be a great pianist, and no one is standing in her way. Neither you"—she paused—"nor your father. *I'll* see to that."

She turned and shut the door abruptly behind her, and Tich heard slow steps moving down the stairs, heavy and weary.

She lay looking up into the darkness to the non-visible ceiling. The necessity of loving and being loved had suddenly ebbed away. In the instant of the brush descending, childhood had dropped from her, and she stood alone in a shadowy world of her own, where people would for ever after enter on her terms.

Tich hated her mother now. Towards Daphne she felt

indifference; never again would she frighten her. It would not now be necessary.

She turned her head into the pillow, and the scarlet peony blossoméd before her eyes; blossomed, and turned ash-brown.

To everyone's surprise Captain Bagot arrived in time for the funeral. His heavy-jowled face was set in down-drawn lines. There was disbelief in his eyes.

He went straight upstairs, to the bedroom which could never again be locked against him, and looked at his wife. He half expected her to open the dark eyes which had looked so kindly and generously on the rest of the world, and flash an insult at him.

What of her voice? he wondered. Shrill, biting staccato of abuse, accusing. She had never resigned herself to his double failure. Thrown out of the Navy for being drunk in command, and now not able to support his children without her help. Why had her love for others not included him? She was kind, she was loved. He stood at the foot of her bed, his eyes on the half-used powder-boxes, now stacked neatly on the dressing-table. Julia was dead. The neat powder-boxes told him so. He breathed deeply to prevent the pricking behind his eyes. Yes, he had loved her. Loved her with all his heart, all his soul. An inarticulate raging love, destructive. It had driven him to drink more and more, to deliberately seek the scenes in which he was held up as a monster before his children.

Abruptly he turned to the door. Julia, Julia. The house is haunted with you. He shouldered his way through the guests, each burdened with black and the nearness of death, and went into the drawing-room. He stood a moment, looking beyond the grand piano out to the garden, green and alive behind the shadowed house. He moved his hands softly over the piano top. The keyboard lay pallid and silent beneath polished wood. . . . Oh, Julia, Julia, mourned his fingers.

A tiny noise disturbed him—coming so quietly through the thick air. His fingers clutched the flat piano-top convulsively, leaving sudden wet streaks.

He turned, and saw the dim figure of Tich, crouched pale in a corner. She was sobbing dryly into her skirt. He gazed at her, stiffening, aware of so many things at once. She was his child, and she was crying. And he knew why she was crying. And he thought of the boat, the *Perseus* to Japan, that would take them away free-hearted, he and his one child.

As he bent down to pull her up, she said, "Daddy . . . oh, Daddy . . . I did love her so much." But her eyes were wide open upon him, telling him all.

He took Tich almost violently to his chest. "You're lying, my girl," he said quietly, decidedly. "You didn't love her—you hated her."

He sighed, as if after great pain.

"And so did I," he said.

ELIZABETH BERRIDGE.

Born 1919. Has published short stories in *Modern Reading*, *Selected Writing*, etc. Is working on her first novel. Married and has a child,

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## SACK LABOURER

by

RAYMOND WILLIAMS

FINISHING fourteen years in this place now. And fourteen years married. On my first week's wages and the money for the lodge her mother gave back to me. I been at it longer'n any of 'em. Potter's had four years, and the other two that's gone to the Army started after me.

When I started the foreman was only cleaning sacks and ~~bundling~~, same job as me. I reckon they picked the wrong chap. Always makes a muck of the office work and the rest of the time he's out. Comes back in sometimes stinking with

drink, and shouts hell out of us. Christ, it'd send anybody daft. Last chap as left used to say, "Is this a warehouse or a madhouse?" and I reckon he was just about right.

Anyhow, he don't frighten me. I ain't so struck on this job. Fourteen years and still two nineteen a week. It ain't good enough and he knows it.

Potter's cleaning now 'cos it's bundling, says we ought to have more chaps. There's six pounds being saved on wages this week, see? Something'll have to happen.

Just before dinner a chap comes in for a job. Potter and me show him where to go in to the foreman. Short little chap, nine stone he reckons he weighs. He gets the job anyhow and he's starting after dinner. Keeps talking with us after he's seen the foreman. Reckons he's been a sailor, been all over the world. Worked in Canada on a wheat farm, sacks twice this size he reckons. Potter gets a handful of corn and asks him what it is. Buckwheat, he says. Potter says it's barley. They get arguing, and Potter says he's got a headache and don't want no more of it. Cocky little devil this new bloke. Still keeps on. Says he bets Potter's never been out of England. Potter starts shouting and says he was in France all the war. Shows him a bullet wound in his chest. This chap reckons he can't see it, and Potter gets wild and asks him if he's calling him a liar, and says he can come and see him drawing his pension—war disablement. This chap starts showing where he's tattooed, all his arms and chest. Says he lived in Guernsey and they was all evacuated 'cos the Germans was coming. Potter and him gets talking a lot and we slow down bundling.

Potter tells him I'm a bit deaf. He looks and winks at me. Then the new chap says "If I told him to shoot hisself he'd hear, wouldn't he?" Potter says he can make me understand—used to him, see? Other bloke starts shouting at me. I just grin and nod at him. It's five to twelve and I start brushing the dust off my trousers. He gets off home and Potter tells me he's no good and won't be here long. I don't take notice. Wait and see what he's like,

Back he comes after dinner. Potter's working downstairs, and I show him round. Rowswell's his name.

There's a brewery out this side, see?—the lorries draw in and load up. The foreman there's no good, but one of the chaps is all right. You wait till we're cleaning—we'll have a couple of bottles out of him. Give him a bit of corn for his fowls. Out this side the railway yard—hell of a noise all day. You always think the trains puffing's the foreman coming up the stairs. Them railway blokes have a nice time. Standing around all day. Got a uncle in Swansea's a shunter. You watch 'em.

All them bundles there, see, me and Potter stacked last Saturday. We got to clean 'em when we finished bundling this lot. Look out, he's down there. We better get on.

Open the tally, hold him at the seams. Seven, fold and in. Six, in, and lift. Six, in, lift and up. Three folds across the mouth. Double two tyers. Round with a loop. Pull. Pull. All right. Take him away and pile him with the others.

Here's your tally. Open. Seven. Six. Six. Tie. Take him away. How many'd he say? Fifteen hundred. Fifteen hundred. Twenty. Five to a hundred. Seventy-five. Done two. Here's your tally. Seven. Six. Six. Tie. Drag him away.

We bundled sixty-two that afternoon. He was stopping every few minutes, and he wasn't lifting in between. Made it twice as hard for me, and my arms were aching by half-past five.

Potter don't turn up next morning. Me and Rowswell bundling again. Do forty, but he still ain't lifting and I'm about tired of it.

"Can you see if he's gone out?"

"Aye, his coat's gone."

Seven. Six. Six. Better tie that time. You get into it. Done forty-one, ain't it?

"You sure he's out?"

"I'll go down and see."

Rowswell goes down. His coat's gone all right. Rowswell's looking right in there. Can't tell the time quick enough, I bet. Where's my fags?

Look what's come now. Potter back, with a doctor's certificate. Cardiac strain, the work's too hard for him. Waiting around for the foreman. Rowswell's laughing at him. Potter's a damn' sight better worker'n ever he'll be, even if he is fifty odd. Do six times the work.

Foreman's come in. Potter's into the office after him. Now for it. Rowswell's coming back upstairs. He'd better lift this lot.

I'd bundled sixty-eight when the foreman came round counting before dinner. Potter's left, given it up.

Just after dinner another chap comes in from the Labour. A little bald bloke, name of Birch. Fred Birch, he said. Seemed anxious we should know. Used to be one of the Terrible Twins, he said, and laughed to hisself; did a music-hall act in Birmingham. When he'd gone in to the foreman Rowswell said his twin brother ought to be still with him, 'cos he didn't look as he could earn a week's wages on his own. He got the job anyhow. Starting in the morning.

About four a customer come. Foreman of course was out. Rowswell said he'd see to him, and a fine bloody mess he made of it too. Give him the counting note instead of the ticket, and I watched him, counted 'em all wrong. Give the chap two too many. I didn't tell him. All bloody yap, he is. Can't do nothing after. He won't stay here long.

Another customer arrived just as we was finishing. Brought back two hundred. Only unloaded 'em. Count 'em in the morning.

Birch comes late in the morning. Foreman shouts hell out of him. Birch says it's his first morning and he don't know the quickest way. Foreman says it's lucky it ain't his last. After that foreman tells him he's fire-watching to-night with Rowswell, and Birch shouts hell out of him. Foreman says he can be prosecuted and Birch shuts up. I start him on cleaning. Always the same. Every new chap as comes here I have to show round.

The three offus cleaning all day. I made the ticket out at night.

EX STACK June 10

33=20=660 R.W.

I showed the others how. They'd done fifteen.

15=20=300 A.R.

15=20=300 F.B.

That Birch can hardly write his initials. Look how many they done too. Got an idea between 'em, I reckon. Both new. If they do the same as each other the foreman can't say nothing. He does, though, when he comes in and looks at it. Says I'd done as much as both of 'em, and I wasn't doin' enough anyway. Christ, what's he been doing all day?

On my own till half-past nine next morning. Other two started late for being fire-watching. Rowswell's got the morning paper, reading it all the time. Birch is sweeping corn up and reckons Rowswell kept him awake all night, saying our planes was Jerries. Rowswell says it's only proper, asks me what would I think if I was bombed and he hadn't let me know? He's on it's in the paper the war's going on for twenty years. That's a bright outlook anyhow. Then he starts cursing the foreman and says there's two wars, one of 'em been on a lot longer'n twenty years. About time he did some work. All bloody yap, he is.

Rowswell was just starting cleaning when all Birch's stacks fell down, all that he'd done the day before. Birch just stood an' looked at 'em, didn't know what to do. Rowswell laughed like hell. Little Birch nearly hit him, then cussed at the sacks instead. He kicked 'em and spat at 'em, then took his waistcoat off and started working like hell putting 'em back up again. They'll be down again if he don't watch out. Hope the foreman don't come up or he'll start.

Rowswell thinks he's well in front of him now, so he does a few then starts reading his paper. One bundle he's done. I'm just off to fetch my third five from the stack and the lorry comes downstairs. I tell Rowswell me and him must load up the bundles we did yesterday. He comes down cursing. Says to me again, wouldn't I blame him if we was fire-watching and I got bombed and he hadn't told me? I

says to him I don't suppose I'd have time to stop and blame anybody. He starts cursing and goes in the lavatory.

Burry the lorry-driver asks about Potter. Says it's strain of the elbow he's more likely to have. We start loading up, and Rowswell comes back and helps us. The foreman comes in and watches us. Rowswell goes on working, wheeling 'em up pretty fast, but he can't tip the bundles over the side of the lorry and Burry has to lift them over. Rowswell keeps winking at Burry, but Burry's sweating and don't take much notice of him. At last the foreman takes Rowswell's truck and tips one over the lorryside to show him. Rowswell nods at him, wheels another up but still can't tip it over. The foreman goes back and stands looking pleased with himself. It's easy enough one. I wheel one up and tip him right into the lorry.

When we'd finished loading the foreman went in to make the note out, and we stood around. Burry said he was chucking this job, there was adverts for lorry-drivers in the papers every day, three-tonners. Damn' sight better than this lot. Rowswell said he was daft. What'd he mean three-tonners? He'd be twice that weight if he didn't work a bit harder. Burry didn't think it was funny, and when Rowswell started laughing like hell again I thought he was for it. But the foreman came out and told us to go back upstairs, and Burry got in the lorry and drove the bundles over the station.

Little Birch had got his stacks up again and was knocking 'em in shape with a broom. Rowswell started again, and told Birch to make stacks like his and then they'd stay up. Birch shuts up, but I can see he don't like it. Then Rowswell starts on me. Tells me where he lives—Verney Court. Says I'm daft to have stuck this place fourteen years, and I work too hard, it makes it bad for him, and I get no better thought of. I let him go on with it. Verney Court. Some place to live. Bloody filthy, always getting summoned for something, drink or black-out or fighting. After cleaning one bundle he starts reading the paper again, and little Birch sits down on the pile of sacks and rests. A train starts in the shunting yard and Rowswell thinks it's the foreman, puts his paper inside that brown overall he's wearing. Then he sees it's the train and takes the paper out again. No sooner's he done

that than the foreman really does come up. I'm working, and Rowswell gets hold of a sack and shakes it. Lot of Indian corn in the bottom. The foreman comes across and watches us. Then he notices Birch. The little bloke's still sitting up there on his pile of sacks, nodding away, with a sack half-folded over his knees. Nothing happens for a minute, and me and Rowswell goes on cleaning, afraid to look for long. The foreman seems he don't know what to do and just gapes at him. Then the sack starts slipping from Birch's hands and something seems to break.

"Hey," the foreman shouts, loud as hell. Birch slips down off the pile of sacks and starts folding the sack in his hand straightaway.

"What d'you think you're doing?" shouts the foreman. Birch takes no notice, goes on shaking his sacks. There's lime in 'em, and he makes a regular cloud round his bald head and his waistcoat gets covered in it.

The foreman stops and watches us till dinner, and we all work twice the rate.

I nearly go to sleep myself over dinner. Missus reckoned I dropped off with my knife and fork in my hand. And Christ it was hot in the afternoon.

I was downstairs about three o'clock counting some sacks a customer brought in. The foreman was in his office, making our pay-packets out. Not much coming for them other two, the week ending on Friday. I look up and see a woman standing by the door, and another behind her. I can't make it out quite and take no notice. Then one of 'em says she wants her husband. I was just going to ask her who he was when the foreman came out. He looks at her and says, "Yes, madam," polite as you like, thinking she was a customer. She smiles and says she wonders if she can see her husband. He turns on her straightaway. "No women allowed in here," he says, and goes back into his office and slams the door.

She looks at me and I says to her, "Who d'you want?" She says, "Alec, Alec Rowswell," so I go upstairs and tell him his missus wants him. Down he comes and his missus smiles

like she's pleased to see him. She's got his gas-mask, he'd taken his little nephew's and the little nephew had got to go back that afternoon and wanted his proper one. He fetches it out and then she tells him about the foreman saying "No women in here." I thought Rowswell would have gone daft the way he carried on. He made her tell him what the foreman said again and then said, "Wait till I see him." She looks at him, kind of pleased, and goes. Just then the foreman comes out of his office. Gives me and him our pay-packets. Rowswell looks at him and just as he's turning to go back to the office he shouts at him:

"Christ almighty, you call yourself a gentleman. Is that any way to treat a lady? I been abroad too much to be sat on by a sod like you. You better give me my cards. You ain't worth working for."

He liked this last lot and said it again. "You better give me my cards. You ain't worth working for." Then he goes back upstairs and the foreman just stands looking at him. I went up when I finished counting, and we went on cleaning. He was telling Birch all that had been said, and Birch was telling him he was right. About six times he told it altogether before it was half-past five.

We was just going. I was brushing my trousers and Birch and Rowswell was standing over by the door. The foreman comes out and goes to them. "Here you are," he says to Rowswell, and gives him his cards. Rowswell stares at him. Then he gives Birch his pay-packet and then his cards and says, "You needn't come to-morrow either." Little Birch gapes at him.

"What's up now?" he says.

"Tell the Exchange you're not satisfactory," says the foreman. Birch don't know what to make of it.

All of a sudden Rowswell starts laughing like hell.

"Where's that Terrible Twin, hey, Birchy?" he shouts at him. Birch scratches his bald head. "Christ," he says, "I wish I'd got him now." The two of 'em goes out together and off up the road.

So I'm on my own now. Me and the foreman, when he's

in, cleaning and building all the sacks for the harvest. It's getting me down and I'm glad I'm going to the Army soon. But what can I do about it till I get more chaps with me. Nothing. I'm only human.

RAYMOND, WILLIAMS.

Born in Wales in 1920. Won a scholarship to Cambridge, where he was President of the Union. Now in the Army in the Royal Corps of Signals. This is his first short story to be published.

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## THE DREAMERS

*by*

G W Y N J O N E S

**I**T was in the poet's month of May that Rhisiart Rhisiarts of Pontymochyndu dreamt a strange and beautiful dream. He dreamt that he was walking towards Capel y Mynydd with a woman at his side. She was tall as his mouth, lithe as a lily, and smelled sweeter than mint after rain. She hung on his arm like a sunlit cloud as they went towards and into the chapel, which was filled with folk of a substance less than flesh but more than shadow, and where they were married by a minister who looked like Merlin and talked like Lloyd George. The ceremony over, they left the chapel, which had somehow silently emptied itself, and walked back through the fields to Rhisiart's house in the valley. A harp sounded from heaven, a brook sang penillion-fashion beside them, and white trefoil filled the footprints of the lady. Rhisiart's heart trembled with fear and joy, his head was thronged with poems of a splendour unknown, his rough hand cradled the lily-fingers of his bride. They reached the little book-strewn house at last, still with no word between them, and then, as Rhisiart bore her in his arms over the threshold of

their room, the dream ended, and he awoke in grief and loss and longing.

Now to appreciate the strangeness of this dream we must remember that Rhisiart was forty and a solitary, that in his day he had passed very high in the College and ever since had been reading a thousand years back. All such are strange beings, and Rhisiart was stranger than most. His particular and private strangeness was that he was frightened of women folk, though to hear him talk you'd never have suspected this—but it is a main misery of our natures that ignorance breeds fear, and of women he was uncommonly ignorant. He hadn't so much as kissed one in fifteen years, and then it was his third-cousin on a Whitsun treat—a deed to be held against no man, surely. Yet he was a great scholar, and could tell you the colour of Vivien's eyes or what size shoes Rhiannon wore. It is likely that no man since Lancelot was more intimate with Gwenhwyfar, and what he didn't know about Olwen, Kilhwch didn't know either. But of sweethearts, none; and of loving, not an hour.

Not that he hated or despised women, or would ever be cruel to them. If they were six or seven hundred years old he could easily be brought to cherish them—and at forty the forest is far from mid-winter and the sap still rising. But he covered uncertainty with severity, spoke from unease with a dry tongue, and his fondlings were hitherto reserved for the smooth sides of old folios. He had even written a poem or two on the subject, in strict metre, though these so far he had kept strictly to himself.

But his dream shook the lessons of a lifetime. For the rest of the night he sought vainly to sleep and seize the happiness so brusquely denied him. It was a sad Rhisiart who came downstairs in the morning. As he cut his bread and butter and steeped the tea, for the first time he resented the quiet of his homely mornings; his window was cut from the sun by the mountain beyond, and a grey dull light banished the apricot glow of his dreaming. The fire mouldered and smouldered, what had been a welcome profusion of litter looked worse than a broken crow's nest, and before finishing breakfast he tipped tea on his copy of *Llywarch Hen*.

He couldn't settle to work. Thoughts he could not regulate drove him out of doors. It was hours later, on the mountain side, that he came to a decision. He had been miserable and puzzled, but all along with more sense than to tell himself it was only a dream and didn't matter. Dreams mattered tremendously, and when they held out prospects so enchanting wouldn't he be duller than dull to ignore them? For five thousand years men had believed in dreams, and there were the Bible and the Mabinogion to prove it. He closed his eyes to think.

He had it! He turned and went striding over the springy grass, past the crumbling stone walls, alongside the brown brook to his house. "Guidance!" he cried, "guidance!" First he cleared half the table with fierce shovelling movements of his hands, and then lifted from his top shelf a mighty canvas-backed volume of the Triads. From this granary of native wisdom, he was sure, a grain would emerge to foul or fatten him. Closing his eyes tightly he opened the leaves at random, and at random set his finger on the right-hand page. What would it say? Ha! THREE THINGS I LOVE TO SEE: HONEY ON MY BREAD; THE FACE OF THE WOMAN I LOVE; AND A ROPE ROUND THE NECK OF AN ENGLISHMAN. He swung his glasses and cogitated, for this, while not decisive, was certainly suggestive: Rhisiart loved honey better than a bee, and had no great fondness for the English (hadn't they hanged an ancestor of his in 1437, and all for stealing a yellow mare?). He would try again. Ha! THREE THINGS WITHOUT WHICH A MAN IS NO MAN: A STAFF IN HIS HAND; MONEY IN HIS PURSE; AND A WIFE IN HIS BED.

His doubts lasted no longer than you'd take to count twelve twelves. Then he read the Triad through a second time with his glasses on and slammed the volume shut.

"So be it!" he said—and was surprised at the depth of his voice—"I will find myself a wife!"

It was a moment of exhilaration and he viewed without flinching the tea-stain on Llywarch Hen. What a future was opening before him! He felt himself one with seekers for the Grail. Somewhere she waited, that exquisite half-seen lady of the night, and ahead lay the tremulous drama of acquaintance, courtship, and consummation. He drew a

meal together, hurriedly consumed it. There was no time to lose. "A wife," he cried, "a wife of my own!" With staff in hand, purse in pocket, and the door on the latch, he set briskly off.

The weather kept fine for him, and he travelled with the sun, south then west through Monmouthshire. That day he walked from Pontymochyndu to Brynmawr and saw not a woman to remind him of his bride: they were too tall, too short, too fat, too thin, had a broken tooth or a shrill voice, or maybe a pimple on the nose. But though all Wales were the casket, he'd walk and seek and find. The second night he slept at Tredegar, and next day walked ten miles down one valley and eleven miles up the next to sleep in Rhymney. The fourth day he walked twenty-five miles and slept in Cefn; the fifth night he was in Aberdare, where it was wet and Sunday; and the sixth at Pontypridd, where he felt himself as far from paradise as ever. He now moped and drooped till the landlord feared for his reckoning and a commercial traveller asked him what was on his mind.

"I am looking for a woman," replied Rhisiart sadly.

"Try Cardiff," said his comforter. "You'll find all you want there."

Rhisiart thanked him for his interest and decided he would, and next morning in good time set off by road. He was afraid that if he used train or bus he might miss his destiny, for the Triads, unlike the Book of Job, say nothing of either. Well, he foot-slogged it through Treforest and past the bottom of Nantgarw, had a drink of water at Taff's Well and another at Tongwynlais; the sun climbed higher, the breeze sank, it was front lawns and flowers all the way to the Cross Inn. He was in Park Place when most people have their lunch, and had his, frugally, on a bench in the park. Before him was a spectacle that swelled him with assurance of triumph: palaces of silvered stone and the long curtain wall of the Castle, promenaded by peacocks and out-topped by a shattered keep. The sky was pale blue and drifted with almost motionless white cloud; around his head swam the odour of wallflowers and tulips; buses trumpeted and tramcars clanged in the mellow distance. It was a scene where Branwen in brocade or Bercilak's lady in cloth of gold

would be more in keeping than city fathers in bowler hats and vestrymen's striped trousers.

With the thought he dusted the crumbs to the sparrows and stood up. He went into town by Kingsway and moved through the crowds, his nose to the wind. He looked at many, and many looked at him. He was a tall man with a cat-head, hair like bull's wool the day after the fair, and rag-mat eyebrows. His nose was beaked, his cheek-bones high, his ears like meat-hooks, only thicker. He wore a corduroy waistcoat, his heel-tips clanked, and he'd left the crease of his trousers somewhere this side of Brynmawr. Some thought him an artist, others didn't know what to think, and to certain fussy ones he looked the kind to gobble little girls up. How picturesque! they said; or How odd! or How horrid!—according to group and fancy. But Rhisiart, staring about him, clutching his staff, striking off sparks, had no thought for this: he was too dazzled by a revelation of female loveliness. This was all around him: from magnificent, languishing ladies who spoke with plums in their mouths down to brisk little working girls, their faces rich with youth and mirth, he saw dozens, scores, hundreds of dear, delightful, alluring, tantalising creatures, any and each one the worthy object of a lifetime's love and cherishing. Why, he exulted, there isn't one of them I wouldn't—

He stopped dead, upsetting the traffic. Any and each one—but to choose—he had to choose. What a problem! A fine firm-built amazon in tweeds and criss-cross brogues banged into him from behind; he staggered against a poppet in a fur cape, tripped, reeled, and fetched up against two dainty darlings whose waists cried out for an arm to encircle them. Must a man starve in the midst of plenty?

It was now, as he gauchely caught at his crumpled hat, mumbling and bumbling for pardon, that he saw go smoothly past a figure that roused in him the tenderest recollection. She was tall as his mouth and lithe as a lily, and at first her face was hidden. Now or never—silence was damnation. He gulped.

"I beg your pardon," he began timidly.

She had a delicate enamelled face that reminded Rhisiart of a cowslip or a sun-lit cloud at evening.

"I have been wondering——"

She offered him sixpence.

"No. It's a mistake. It's because I had a dream six nights ago——"

She had thought him wild-looking but civil, but now she feared a savage. Clipping her bag to, she stepped back.

"I wanted to ask you—please!" cried Rhisiart.

"Well?" It was a voice of such beauty and finality that Rhisiart thought of the name-plate on a coffin.

"I had a dream six nights ago. I thought I got married, only I woke up too soon. To a woman like you. So I thought perhaps you——"

Her face matched the velvet peony on her jacket. "Really! In broad daylight too!"

"I'm sorry," said Rhisiart miserably.

"Is he annoying you?" asked a burly brute in a green pullover. "If so——" He was privet to Rhisiart's gorse, a thick-head hero eager for fame. He folded his fist, and Rhisiart took the weight of his staff, in case.

"I made a mistake," he said humbly. "I ask your pardon. But," he added, "it was no ordinary dream."

They hurried away from the tanglewood madman, the hero outwardly solicitous and inwardly congratulating himself, holding her elbow in the genteelst fashion, but Rhisiart slunk like a dog into a side street. He thought it dismal he should fail, and after a while returned to the crowds, waited on inspiration, and tried again, but Beauty lacked Bounty, and a threat to call a policeman sent him scuttling to cover. A third time he ventured out but this time chose a timid one. Marriage is one thing, but prison for the most part another, and he was thinking it wise though ignoble to catch the first train for Pontymochyndu when coming along the pavement towards him he noticed a tall, slim, and most potently attired young woman. She wore a flowered frock and a cartwheel hat, her shoes glittered in the sun, her gloves and bag were white, her bangles of coral, and in all ways she looked better than poppies in corn. Soon she was close enough for him to see that her lips were scarlet, her hair like gold, and her eyes changed from red to green as the words came out of his mouth.

"I beg your pardon," he began, and she stopped. For him, Rhisiart, she stopped! "I had a dream six nights ago—"

"That was nice, honey," said the girl. "Tell me about it."

He did. That she should listen was joy; that she smiled was pure heaven. Words flowed to his tongue. He developed quite a *hwyl*. •

"And it ended at the top of the stairs?"

He said yes with his hands.

"Well, fancy that!" She laughed. "That's where mine begin." He was still working this out when she asked him: "Would you know her again, to speak to?"

He knew, he told her warmly, that she was lovely enough to be queen to all men from Wye to Towy.

"That's a pretty tall order. Would she be like enough me, d'you think?" She laughed again, taking his arm. "Shall we be going?"

"To Pontymochyndu?"

"No fear!" Rhisiart grew anxious. Something had gone wrong, possibly her spelling. "How about to where you left off, honey?"

"But there's been a mistake," he said agitatedly. "You don't understand."

"Of course I do," she laughed. "We're only young once, that's what I say."

"It's not a laughing matter. My whole future depends on it. I'm looking for my wife."

Her eyes changed back through yellow to red, her knuckles tightened over her bag, and her lips went twice as thin. When he tried to explain further, she told him lots he didn't like hearing and called him what he knew he wasn't. Wife indeed! Between these two bus stops? Didn't he believe in live and let live?

She moved off handsomely but in a hurry, and the next minute a policeman was tapping Rhisiart's arm. "Where you from?" he asked coldly, and listened. "And what you think you're up to?" Rhisiart could tell he didn't believe him. "Fine old scandal this'll be for Pontymochyndu," said the bobby angrily. He scratched the small of his back and then the back of his head. "But there, I'm a Monmouthshire

man myself, and we've got to stick together, I s'pose. There's a train for home in twenty minutes, and you better be on it. Get me?"

Rhisiart got him, dead centre, and had breath left over for thanks. He'd had his bellyful of dreaming. At Newport he had time to visit a bookshop, and before he reached Pontymochyndu was translating Juvenal's Sixth Satire—the One on Women—into Welsh.

"Hear about Pugh the Bryn?" the porter asked him. He was quite a stranger after six days' absence.

"What about him?"

"Buried this morning at Capel y Mynydd. That's life for you," said the porter.

"On the contrary!" Rhisiart gave up his ticket thoughtfully. His head was full of his reading: no doubt she'd poisoned him or got her paramour to push him under a cart. Women!

"Pneumonia," said the porter. "Galloping."

Rhisiart laughed sourly. Maybe! The world was easily deceived still. Poor fools of men! But Pugh was a neighbour, and he'd better call before nightfall. Then a new thought filled his head. Mrs. Pugh's estate and his own were not too dissimilar. She had buried a husband that day, and he a wife. It was a quaint idea and he played with it all the way to the Bryn. His boots were black and his collar six-days-dirty, so he was dressed for the part all right. Not far from the Bryn he met Jeremiah Jenkins and gave him good-night. "And it is a good night," said Jeremiah. "But a sad affair?" Rhisiart suggested. Jeremiah's thoughts seemed elsewhere, for he nodded and said it might have been worse. With that they parted. He had been best man at Pugh's wedding, had Jeremiah, and Rhisiart judged him stupid with grief.

With his new-opened eyes he saw surprisingly what a fine piece Mrs. Pugh was. Thirty-eight years old and never a child of her body, and the whitest neck, past question, in all Monmouthshire. Maybe the tears had made her eyes gleam, but gleam they did most disturbingly. Her mourning blouse was relieved by a gold locket, and her stockings were silk, not wool. Looks more like a bride than a widow, thought Rhisiart harshly.

He took a glass of port out of respect, and because he'd been walking and was dry it went down so fast he had to have another. He never drank, and after the second glass was much surprised to hear the china dogs barking on the mantelpiece.

"But it's all in the stars," said Mrs. Pugh. "And it all comes through to us, if only we know how."

"Maybe." Rhisiart was not committing himself.

"Now you are a man with schooling, Mr. Rhisiarts——"

"A litte here and there, true."

"And you know more than most of us."

He sipped his port. "I wouldn't say that, Mrs. Pugh."

Well there, if she insisted! "And you keep a still tongue in your head. So I'll tell you, and ask your advice."

He hadn't meant to beam, but he could tell by the feel of his face that he was—for the first time in years—at a woman. Such sense, such deference, such a white neck!

"I am a great one for dreaming, Mr. Rhisiarts. Pugh told me, poor feller, it's because I eat a good supper, but it makes no difference if I go to bed as empty as a kettledrum. If there are dreams to be had, I'll have them. I dreamt that Pugh would cross over, Mr. Rhisiarts—a week before the very day, I dreamt it. Do you believe in dreams, Mr. Rhisiarts bach?"

"I do," he said earnestly, "I do. You interest me strangely, Mrs. Pugh."

"And it came true." She took out two handkerchiefs and chose the one with lace on it. "I'm only a poor widow, Mr. Rhisiarts bach."

He groaned. "Poor little woman, poor little woman!"

"And that's not all I dreamt. And this is what I wanted to ask you about—for no one has more feeling for a man with schooling than I have, Mr. Rhisiarts—I dreamt I got married again double quick." His eyes grew big as tea-pots. "Was that a wicked dream, Mr. Rhisiarts bach?"

"It came from heaven, Mrs. Pugh." In his left-hand pocket his fingers touched the libeller of women and recoiled as from a snake. "I too have dreams. What dreams!"

"I don't know what people will say——"

"Pah!" He shot his port to the pit of his stomach.  
"That for them!"

"I always knew you were a man with schooling," said the widow.

"And dreams," said Rhisiart; "dr-r-reams, Mrs. Pugh. I thank God in the highest, Mrs. Pugh, and I thank God in the lowest, for that lovely dream. We should always follow our dreams. You dream and I dream—everybody dreams. And what did Dyvynwal Moelmud himself say of dreams? He said: Better a good dream than a bad awakening—that's what he said, Mrs. Pugh, and he one of the three National Pillars of the Island of Britain—one of the three Beneficent Sovereigns of the Cymry."

"There's lovely you talk," said the widow.

Rhisiart leaned forward and caught her hand. "Mrs. Pugh, little woman, look—couldn't we—couldn't you and I—?"

"I'm quite frightened of you, Mr. Rhisiarts. A poor widow like me all on her own in the house—I couldn't even call out for help if you was to—"

"I mean, get married," said Rhisiart.

"Oh good lord enow!" she cried. "And I might have too, only Jeremiah asked me on the way back from chapel to-day." For a moment she looked as dashed as he; then she brightened and nipped his leg playfully. "Never mind, Mr. Rhisiarts bach. You shall be my third, never fear."

"No!" he cried, "no!" and reached for his staff. He looked so funny standing there that the widow Pugh laughed till her fat shook.

"Women!" cried Rhisiart.

### GWYN JONES.

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# STAGGERED HOLIDAY

*by*

O SBERT SITWELL

MISS LUMSFORD always put her aunt away upstairs before she came down to dinner, even in the summer. It was so draughty in the lounge. Usually she played patience by herself afterwards until bedtime, or sometimes bridge with three other ladies of her own age, who were also looking after relatives. But to-night she must begin her packing, for they were going down to the country on Monday—the first time since the war—with dear old Miss Flitlock and her companion, Miss Brimbleby, and it would not do to leave everything till the last. Country air for a month would do them all good—you could see Aunt Fanny needed it. Aunt Fanny was not rich, and so, in addition, it would be a comfort to be able to share the expense, as well as have someone to talk to. All the same, Miss Brimbleby was . . . well, rather worldly and mercenary in her outlook: but then a paid companion was *never* like a niece, could not give the same affection: how could she? It was different.

It seemed quite like old times having a holiday—though later in the year, September; perhaps that was what was meant by “staggered holidays,” of which she had read in the papers (the papers were so puzzling now, and difficult to follow, not like what they used to be). They were taking two Daimler hire cars, and Miss Flitlock’s Bedlington—dear dog—and her maid would go down with them. It was quite a short run, and the motors were big enough to put a bed in. . . . And when they came back, they were going to move into the Fairlawne Hotel so as to be *together*. It would make a lot of difference to the old ladies—much *nicer* that way. Of course it was really too expensive, but as Miss Flitlock was rich and took a lot of extras, and was a valuable client, and because Miss Brimbleby had told them *how quiet* Aunt Fanny was, and that she ate so little and gave so little trouble,

the management had agreed to make special terms for her.

It was really wonderful the way—with all her disabilities—Aunt Fanny made friends. People would often come up to look at her and say, “Well, I hope when I’m her age, I shall be like that.” . . . Not that she was really old, only seventy-six—whereas Miss Pandlecross, who lived in the room next door and still did her own hair, was ninety-two, but with all her faculties about her—except for those silly fits of hers, when she thought she was somebody else. . . . Somebody more important; now who was it? . . . But Miss Lumsford could not remember.

“You’re very *distract* to-night, aren’t you?” her bridge partner inquired towards the end of the rubber, and after Miss Lumsford had lost, and had gone upstairs to bed, this acquaintance had confided in the porter that she thought Miss Lumsford was “getting queer.”

A broad road and several sets of railings still divided Hyde Park from Kensington Gardens, the statue of Peter Pan, Watts’s Horse, and the groups of shouting, playing children. By the Round Pond their cries filled the air under the elm trees. But below, towards Kensington Gore, there is a corner, running from the Albert Memorial to the beginning of Gloucester Road, that seems devoted to old people. Deeply sheltered on each side by banks loaded with flowers and flowering shrubs, is an asphalt path, in fine weather lined with seats and chairs. From here you see nothing of the town, only the golden dagoba that formed the top of Albert the Good’s mosaic shrine. The rich, closely cropped grass, with the undulating line of its herbaceous border, the beds that fitted so cleverly into its shape; all this is varied with semi-exotic trees and shrubs, each bearing its own zinc identity disk. And the flower-beds themselves are full of new varieties of old favourites, or of flowers that have been trained to come out at the wrong time and are now all ablaze in their perverted season. . . . Nature is tame and easy here, and the roses smell particularly delicious as their freshness mingles with the acrid scent of tar from somewhere hidden but nearby.

The sun usually seemed to be out in this corner, even

when it is late autumn, and it is here that the inhabitants of those yellow-stucco'd hotels of South Kensington, whose tribes form a city, almost a nation, by themselves, gather together to sit and talk and knit. It was always crowded and everybody seemed to know everybody else—or, at least, certain sets to know certain other sets—and this inspired an air of seeming gaiety, of perpetual, superannuated garden-party. Passing by, you would hear women say, while they gave a violent dig with a long stiletto-like needle at a piece of knitting as in other ages they would have lunged at a lover's glowing heart, "Really, you would never think you were in London!" so that, obviously, it was the resort of those who would rather be in the country or at a spa. You never—or hardly ever—saw children here, but dogs, lots of dogs. A border of steel hoops, and leashes and cries of peremptory affection, kept these off the flowers.

If a child strayed hither with a nurse, he would feel uncomfortable, and his supplanters and substitutes would set up an intolerable barking. There were fox-terriers, fussy and inquisitive, and rough-haired terriers, with square-cut noses, pomeranians, one or two dalmatians, dogs shaggy and dogs smooth-coated; some dogs were clipped and some wore jackets; there were airedales and scotties and sealyhams and pugs, and one or two proud but slinky Bedlingtonts, with mauve fringes, curled like parma violets. . . . These last looked out of place here, where Queen Victoria and her son still ruled. They seemed too modern among these quilted forms and trailing draperies, grey waistcoats and grey bowler hats, as well as every variety of soft hat.

Nevertheless, fashion occupied only the middle of the path, and formed a self-provided pageant for the watchers, the knitters, solitary or clustered. Sometimes, it was plain, those who loved trees and nature resented the display; they would fix their gaze on the leaves, green or golden, and pretend not to see the procession of presumptive colonels and their wives, though hardly able to resist giving a smile and a pat to the accompanying dogs. They would say nothing, but keep their lips as straight as parallel straight lines—though, after they had passed, they would bestow a glance of shrewd estimation upon their backs, or, if grouped, would

whisper together. An unwilling backward flicker of the eye on the part of the victims who had run the gauntlet would show that they were conscious of their ordeal: but this awareness never prevented them from walking past again in the opposite direction.

But I have kept the chief feature of this walk until the last. If you stood at either end and looked up and down the gay and flowery aisle, umbrageous yet dappled with hot sun, looked at the silks and laces still here extant, and the hats that were like the good things you used to see exposed for sale in peace-time in the windows of the Maison Lyons, the impression was of a series of courts being held, round thrones on which the kings and queens reclined rather than sat: for the place was so *nice* and countrified, yet never dull, and so the elder daughter, or the niece or the companion, or sometimes the two daughters, would wheel hither their mothers or aunts or protectors in their various chairs or on their various trays. . . . It meant just a quick bolt across Kensington High Street at the broad part. The policeman by the island was always kind and held up the traffic for them to pass, and even the bus-conductors, though brought to so abrupt a halt, would be kind too, and try to look bored and yawn and so not rivet their gaze upon the phenomena being shot past underneath them; creations by Breughel and Bosch, but adapted to a mechanical age, subject to wheels and levers and a hundred ingenious devices to enliven and give speed. It was *extraordinary* how kind people were. No trouble seemed too much. And when they had crossed over, the attendants at the new brick public lavatories just outside the garden by the railings, would be sure to be there in the doorway, and would come out with a smile and a nice word for the invalid. Miss Lumsford often said you felt that they would go through fire and water for Aunt Fanny.

"And how is Mrs. Hampton-Ditchcote this morning, miss?"

"Well . . . don't you think she *looks* better to-day, Mrs. Dingle, now that she's got that nice new hat? . . . We're quite smart to-day, aren't we, dear? . . . All right, you old dear, don't try to answer if it's difficult. You mustn't worry yourself. We know you like it. Yes, *like* it. Do you hear her,

Mrs. Dingle; She's telling you she likes it. Yes, Li'it. Isn't she *splendid*? And Dr. Mactavish was so pleased with her yesterday. . . . We're going for a holiday, too, on Monday—the day after to-morrow."

"That will bring the roses back to her cheeks, won't it, miss? I don't wonder you're proud of her!"

They always had a little talk like that, and then they would turn up a path and soon be in the strip of paradise that I have described. . . . The ritual was the same every week-day; but on Sundays it was different. Then the crocodiles that joined together from the various hotels came out later that day, for, before leaving their rooms, the daughters, nieces or companions read prayers to their captives, bound hand and foot by infirmity, and decked out in special Sunday finery, with ribbons and bows. When at last they issued forth, there was less traffic and in consequence it was easier to cross the road; and the lavatory attendants were wearing their best clothes too. And Mrs. Dingle would be sure to say, "And have we been to church to-day? . . . You look as it you had, miss. I always love the way you dress Mrs. Hampton-Ditchcote on Sundays—so many of the ladies are just alike. It's not easy to be original."

"I thought it better not to take her *to-day*," Miss Lumsford would reply . . . "perhaps next Sunday. But it is dreadfully hot in church, and my aunt was always so keen on fresh air, and it is not easy to get out."

That was life on Sunday; but to-day is Saturday, and now we can view with a full knowledge the whole scene as it was on a summer day in early September. The trees, the sunlight mixing with the leaves, the gay, feathery shadows, the flowers, in broad bands and splashes, all preparing a sort of *fête champêtre* atmosphere, and then the little animated knots of people, each surrounding a chair or a tray that jutted out into the path, and, in the middle, the promenade of red-faced men with jutting chins and arthritic hips, whom we have classified as colonels and civil-servants, hobbling along with their wives, pale from too long a sojourn in southern climes, and dressed in flowery fantasies that are the ghosts of garden-parties given a quarter of a century ago, while, over all, there spread the noble anthem of free, English

dogs, barking like drawn string, on and on and on, to their hearts' content. Dear Little Dogs.

Dear Little Dogs! . . . On their ledges and various supports, the invalids watched them fondly; there were old ladies who sat up with an effort and talked, there were old ladies who reclined at full length, so that all you could see was the front of a baby-cap and two gleaming eyes; there were old ladies, red and rotund, who seemed to be roasting before some eternal fire, and old ladies who trembled and shivered as if fixed and remote in some arctic world of their own creation. Some faces were mottled, some purple, some jaundiced, some bore on their surface large brown patches, and one, well known, was of a pale and silvery blue. The worse the condition of the invalids, the more cheerful their attendants had to appear; their faces wreathed in smiles, it seemed as though some insane gaiety inspired them. There was constant movement, flow and chatter, from one court to another, though those that reigned were static. And it was to be noticed that the gallant old gentlemen who passed from time to time and stopped to talk to invalids, never addressed them in the conventional second-person plural, but all of them, adopting the same jocose formula, asked, "And how are *we* this morning?" or "Did we have a good night?" But it was not easy to hear the replies, for those dear little square-cut scotties or airedales were bouncing up and down on their straight, squat legs, barking as though they contained rattles within them.

Very strong was the scent of roses this morning, for the gardeners seemed to take a special pride in this walk and spent endless hours cherishing each blossom and sprinkling it with water, and seeing that the zinc labels were clean and could be easily read. The war had made no difference to this yet, nor much to the general tone of the place. If men in uniform passed through, they hurried. This was no haunt for them. One or two soldiers from far away, Canada or Australia, sometimes strayed here and sat for half an hour or so, musing and mute. Miss Lumsford had been surprised, only the other day, at the bold manner in which Miss Necker, that horrid old Mrs. Lambertson-Jenkins's niece, had accosted them, going up to talk to them and offer them

cigarettes! But that was exceptional, as a rule people behaved beautifully. The old ladies seemed scarcely to see them. Most of those on trays moved their heads with difficulty, so they were obliged to take a special interest in the groups opposite them.

And here, in friendship, as so often in love, the law of natural selection, which ever favours the average, manifested itself. Just as people not seldom select mates because of the opposite qualities they possess, so here, an old lady, rubicund and with weak eyes, would prefer the shade, while the old lady opposite, with mauve or yellow skin and a terrible internal shiver, would prefer the sun to warm her bones. Since their favourite stands were immediately recognised as theirs by the laws prevailing here, no one would dream of usurping another's pitch. In consequence these two would be opposite each other every fine day for years; for death comes to this sort of invalid by instalments, and there was only one more lot to pay. Thus confined to staring at each other across the path, warm friendships would grow up, often without speaking, and each old lady would from time to time flutter a finger or even the end of a mitten hand—or perhaps her companion might have to take it and wave it for her—at her opposite number.

It had been in this precise fashion that Mrs. Hampton-Ditchcote and Miss Flitlock had met—if met it can be called. Mrs. Hampton-Ditchcote spent the morning under a weeping acacia that looked as if it had been created to shelter a nymph, while Miss Flitlock lived in the brave sunshine.

“Look! Aunt Fanny,” Miss Lumsford would say, “there’s Miss Flitlock! Wave at her, she’s smiling at you. Shall I run over and tell her how much you’re looking forward to going to stay with her at Horsham on Monday. (How happy you two will be, seeing such a lot of each other.) Look, again: Miss Brimbleby’s helping her to wave!”

Certainly, Miss Lumsford reflected, as she sat down to talk to Miss Brimbleby, it was a pretty place and convenient. It seemed so safe and nice. People were so kind. That dear Mrs. Dingle—they had made friends the day Aunt Fanny had fainted. The doctor had told Miss Lumsford that she

could expect this symptom, and to look out for it—but it wasn't always easy to *tell* when the old lady had fainted; for she wasn't very mobile or animated. Suddenly, sitting here just as they were this morning, she realised it had happened, and had run to Mrs. Dingle in the lavatory. Kind soul, she had at once brought out lavender-water and eau-de-cologne, and even a thimbleful of brandy; and these cross-Channel restoratives had soon pulled the old lady round. It was a relief to feel there was someone like that *near*; for Miss Brimbleby, though no doubt a charming woman—lots of people found her charming—was not so practical, not so quick or resourceful in a tight corner.

Tranquil times, you would have thought, lay ahead for these old ladies on whom so much care was lavished. But suddenly, that very day, things altered. They had gone back there again at four in the afternoon, it was so warm and sunny and, just as the last invalids were being wheeled away, a battle took place high above London. The sirens sounded but no one took much notice. Nothing had happened up till now. And the noise only made people feel pleasantly that they were "in things."

Miss Lumsford stopped wheeling Aunt Fanny, and *made* her take an interest. It was good for her.

"Look there, darling," she cried, "more aeroplanes. Look, you can hardly see them. Up there! and the pretty white puffs. They're chasing one another, do you see, over there? Puff! Puff! Puff!"

Aunt Fanny stirred uneasily on her tray.

A fire began that evening, and the first real bombing of London occurred. Once or twice, the enormous noises of the night approached very close to the city of yellow hotels, that seemed always to exist within their own protecting fog; very near. It seemed, indeed, at one moment as though some vast extinct beast or reptile had been woken from millennium-old sleep in the Natural History Museum nearby, and had begun to bray at the strange orange glow that suffused the eastern sky. Yet that first night was not so bad. People were alert and amiable and talkative—and there was something to talk about—and dinner was nearly over before the noise became overwhelming. Miss Lumsford

went upstairs then and sat with her aunt, and tried to explain about what was going on.

"It's *fireworks*, darling," she insisted kindly, "only fireworks. You used to love them, do you remember, at Cheltenham? Listen, there's another—such a fine one!"

It was difficult to know how much Aunt Fanny took in, Miss Lumsford thought. What a blessing it was that, though high up, they were so near the lift. But it would be difficult to dress her aunt and take her down to the air-raid shelter. It had looked so damp and draughty, and the old lady would be sure to catch cold, so, as they were going away so soon, it was wise to get on with the packing. The noise could not continue like this for long. As she wrapped things up in tissue-paper she tried not to hear it. But she wished Aunt Fanny had got a dog. What a comfort an airedale would be now! The noise seemed to be getting worse instead of better! All the same, she managed to go to sleep.

The next morning, Sunday, everything was calm and fine and quiet, and at half-past eleven they set out as usual. Nothing between the hotel and the gardens seemed to have been destroyed.

After they had crossed the road, Mrs. Dingle came out to talk. She looked pale and untidy this morning, quite unlike herself. But she did not complain, but said:

"And did Mrs. Hampton-Ditchcote, dear old lady, mind that dreadful bombing?"

She oughtn't to speak like that: Aunt Fanny didn't know! But the Lumsfords had always prided themselves on showing nothing, so Miss Lumsford restrained her anger, and merely replied:

"Not at all!" and then added, "It's the sirens my aunt does not like. They make her so nervous; I thought she was going to speak when she heard them. But she doesn't mind the bombing; not a bit. (We don't mind the bombing, do we dear?" she asked the old lady, tidying her hair, and tugging at a muslin collar.) "You see, she's used to that sort of thing. Why, my mother told me that Aunt Fanny, before her illness, often used to go out shooting with the men."

When they reached the path, embowered in blossom, it was peculiarly empty, except for a few invalids, whose

incomes were so close cut to the pension terms in their hotels that they could make no preparations for going away. Hardly any courts were being held, and the usual promenade of Anglo-Indians did not take place. Some women still sat knitting, but even they were talking in a lower voice than usual, as if afraid that some German aeroplane might overhear them. . . . Still, it was quite pleasant there, in the sun—except that Aunt Fanny lay there in the fronded shade, with no complement opposite. One could not help missing dear old Miss Flitlock, and Miss Brimbleby. No doubt they had decided to stay at home at Fairlawne to-day and do the packing: Miss Brimbleby was rather the kind of person who liked to leave things till the last. Never mind, the two old ladies would see a lot of one another in the next month, so it did not matter. There was a new catalpa in bloom to-day, she noticed; creamy blossom, yellow and pink-tongued, clustered among broad green leaves that, unlike other trees at this season, seemed always to hold the green of the spring within them. She pointed it out to Aunt Fanny.

"Look there, darling," she said. "Even the Huns can't keep the catalpa from flowering."

She spoke in a rather loud and ostentatious voice, and the knitters lowered their tones still further in contradiction. Or were they talking about her? she wondered. But they couldn't be. "Odd," she heard one of them say, "odd in her manner."

About 12.30, just as they were starting home for luncheon, the alert sounded again. If it had not been for kind Mrs. Dingle, they would *never* have got home in time. But Mrs. Dingle had hurriedly put on her hat and coat, locked the lavatory door, and helped push Mrs. Hampton-Ditchcote home on her wheeled tray.

"Well, we must say good-bye nicely to Mrs. Dingle, mustn't we?" Miss Lumsford had said to her aunt as they reached the hotel. "We're going away to-morrow for a month, for a lovely holiday with Miss Flitlock and Miss Brimbleby—you know, Mrs. Dingle, the two ladies opposite—an hotel in Horsham. Oh, we're looking forward to it *so* much. It's a lovely country place, they say, with two con-

verted' oast-houses in the garden. Say good-bye, dear! Good-bye! Do you see, she's saying goo'bye! Thank you, thank you!"

It was really extremely kind of her—especially as she was worrying the whole time in case she might have locked someone in. Still no message from Miss Brimbleby about the motor. It was strange—still, she was always a bit unpunctual, casual, as it were. She was sure to telephone to-night. Not until after dinner about half-past eight did she receive the explanation, when the other guests came up to talk to her and told her that Fairlawne had been blown up last night, with everyone in it. The bodies were still being looked for.

She didn't know *what* to do—and it would be a great shock to Aunt Fanny: what *could* she tell her? For Aunt Fanny knew all about the holiday, she was sure about that. And they couldn't go by themselves, it would be much too expensive for two people alone: on the other hand, if she started unpacking, Aunt Fanny would notice that at once—she was so sharp—and begin that funny noise, like someone humming, that she made sometimes. . . . She decided to say that Miss Flitcock had got a slight cold, and the holiday was "put off." But just as she was telling the old lady this, the bombing began again—and without the sirens sounding first.

Really one could hardly hear oneself speak! Suddenly she felt annoyed, overwrought. Something in the way her aunt lay there and said nothing annoyed her. Miss Lumsford began to shout.

"They're bombs you hear! *Bombs!* The same things that killed Miss Flitcock and Miss Brimbleby. Can't you hear, can't you answer? Do speak; I'm tired of always doing the talking"—and she gave her aunt a slight shake. "There it is again! Bang! It's a *bomb!*!"

Afterwards she regretted having spoken like that: but the old lady naturally hadn't taken it in. She said nothing more about the holiday, and decided to leave the unpacking until the next day.

All that night her aunt had been very restless. It had

been impossible to sleep. And then, about six, she had seemed to be quieter. Miss Lumsford woke at nine (how late they were!) and opened up. At first she hardly remembered—and then it came back to her. But really now she didn't bother much about the night and its happenings; had forgotten the way she had spoken to her aunt, could not worry over Miss Flitlock and Miss Brimbleby—that was past. What could you do about it? She ordered her aunt's breakfast and took in the tray herself. She propped up a pillow or two and began to feed the old lady. But Aunt Fanny was still in one of her difficult moods, and would not co-operate, but kept her mouth open. Well, you can't *make* people eat. If they won't, they won't. And one meal more or less, the doctors say, makes no difference. But it was trying of her, when everyone was tired.

Miss Lumsford had difficulty too, later, in dressing the old lady. She began to feel angry with her again. Of course, partly it was her illness, but, all the same, she made no effort, none at all. Indeed, to-day, she seemed, if anything, to be resisting the clothes that her niece was putting on her. (It reminded Miss Lumsford of how she used to dress her doll, oh, so long ago now!) No, she ought to *try* more. If she didn't make more effort soon, Miss Lumsford decided, she would give her another shaking. But no, she mustn't: after all, her aunt depended on her.

Eventually she finished dressing her. It was a hot day again, by the look of it, so she put a nice, wide, lacey hat on the old lady's head, with a transparent brim that shaded the eyes. And then she got her somehow into her chair, without having to call Elsie, the housemaid, to help. (Somehow or other, she wanted to do things by herself this morning, didn't feel inclined to have a lot of people running in and out of the room.) She went into the passage, rang for the lift, wheeled her aunt into it, took it down, and wheeled her out of it, through the hall, into the open air. Yes, it was a lovely morning again.

After they had reached Kensington Gore and crossed the road in the usual manner, Mrs. Dingle came out again to speak to her.

"Oh, Miss Lumsford," she said, "what a *dreadful* night!"

I don't think you should have brought the poor old lady out again this morning. You said you were going away. It would be much better for her. There'll be another attack soon, I expect."

Miss Lumsford kept her temper and did not explain, though she would have liked to argue. (She felt like that this morning.) She merely said to the figure on the tray-chair:

"We can't wait in all day, can we, Aunt Fanny?"

The particular immobility which the invalid showed this morning attracted Mrs. Dingle's attention.

"I know Mr. Fowler, next door, wants to say good-morning, miss," she said, and fetched him to have a look. They both gazed curiously at the old lady, who was staring in a fixed way beneath her lace hat.

As Miss Lumsford passed on, wheeling her charge in front of her, the two attendants looked at each other.

"Well, whatever do you think of that, Alfred?" Mrs. Dingle asked.

"Scarecrow's a bit potty, I should say," he replied. "There's something wrong there! Better tell the constable."

Miss Lumsford settled herself and her aunt in the usual place, under the acacia. Everything seemed so quiet. Even the day seemed depressed. The little paradise was empty except for the few invalids who were so poor they still could not manage to go away. Down the broad road on to which the street of hotels converged could be seen the strangest procession, all the morning long, of huge old-fashioned motors pounding away to the country, carrying their precious freight. Some had beds in them, with figures lying at full length; others contained sitting figures, but shaking, quaking, so that they had to be strapped into place, shivering over their reins like a baby strapped into his chair; others, again, bore figures stiff, yellow, and richly dressed as the images held high at religious festivals.

Miss Lumsford sat with her back to them as they passed, and between was the barrier of shrubs and flowers, a wide stretch of grass, and the line of railings, like spears. But she could hear the sound of the traffic, and no doubt it brought

back to her the idea of their lost holiday. She talked a little to her aunt.

"Look, dear! The catalpa has come on wonderfully," she said.

But it was no use. Her aunt seemed to take no notice of anything to-day. She could not help feeling annoyed again; it was better to employ herself somehow, good for the nerves. So she was just settling down to knit when a sergeant of police and a constable passed by. . . . They looked at the old lady rather intently, she thought.

Then they turned and came back to her.

"She oughtn't to be 'ere, miss," the sergeant said to her. "She's *dead*. Look at her eyes, poor old lady!"

Miss Lumsford began to argue.

"Is it likely I should wheel about a corpse?" she asked haughtily—and then suddenly began to laugh. Peals of laughter sounded in the green shade under the acacia, until the pounding of the huge motors along the road obliterated this other sound—But she was still laughing.

#### OSBERT SITWELL.

Born 1892. Has published many books of all kinds. His last book of short stories was *Open the Door!*

# MARRIED MAN

by

## L. A. PAVEY

“**I** THINK, Margaret, the children were up quite late enough. Too late, if anything,” observed Mr. Instone, Mr. Edward Halling Instone, already, at seven p.m. seated in his armchair. He spoke judicially, but he was unable to keep a trace of irritation out of his voice.

Well, anyway, thought Mrs. Instone, you have four clear hours of the evening before you. But she said nothing. She was busy on the last stages of preparation for the evening meal.

Mr. Instone felt, nay he knew, that it would be unreasonable for anybody to expect him to “settle to anything” before dinner was over. In his own mind, and sometimes openly to Mrs. Instone, he put it as though meals were disabilities imposed on long-suffering householders by the decree of an outside authority which could not be circumvented. And but for this his evening would have been a very different affair; a thing of vigour and beauty and not a ruin crumbled by the unceasing attrition of world forces in opposition. He stoutly opposed all Mrs. Instone’s practical suggestions for reform from his own side, however, and she never had occasion to observe that his appetite suffered by reason of his objections.

He was, as usual, back in his armchair at eight. His irritation had long since vanished. And for the moment, although he felt that three valuable hours stretched before him, he was pleasantly conscious that very few women could make better apple-tart than Margaret. Well, the evening for him, if not for most men, would be a serious affair enough—plenty to do, plenty to think about—but there could surely be no harm in feeling pleasantly well-fed as a start. His wife was not in her chair yet; but she always said she liked the little job of clearing away and washing-up.

They had only a daily girl and she had long since gone home. So he could rearrange his affairs in his own mind without having to mix in any talk. He sighed gently, looked at the fire and the quality of the ash, at the glow of the flames on the rosewood of the furniture. He felt that it was good for him that his forces should sometimes lie dormant. They would be stronger, better knit together, when it became a question of collecting them for action. . . .

"Well, Edward, that's that!" said his wife brightly. She sat herself on her chair, not as her husband did, in the whole of the chair, but on the edge. It looked to him uncomfortable. And to a very small degree it lowered the quality of his own repose.

"Yes," he said non-committally, "but why don't you sit down, my dear? Really sit down, I mean. We've paid for the whole of the chairs."

She smiled, though she had heard this joke before.

"Oh, I shall be getting some mending in a moment," she said.

As usual, he felt a little aggrieved. Margaret would look busy again, and it would appear that he was not, though actually he intended to put in a most remarkable evening, so far as mental activity went. He . . .

Margaret recited a list of the things which had holes worn in them. This was, he felt, rubbing it in. He began once more to experience a slight feeling of annoyance. If it wasn't the children themselves, it was their clothes. It did not make for the peace he so desired, that he felt, almost passionately, should be his. But there it was, he knew how to be magnanimous. He agreed, as a reasonable man, that Peter was very hard on his shoes and Rosemary's slight figure a most difficult one to dress. They had reached perfect unanimity on these matters before, but though he was a business man who did not like to duplicate routine he forbore from mentioning it.

Margaret switched on the wireless, and switched it off again after half a bar of a full-throated tenor voice and pianoforte accompaniment. "I can't stand tenors," she said. "And I believe it was that opera thing—what d'you call it?" That was like her, but he hated it. It was altogether too swift

for him, and he squirmed in his chair, just slightly, ~~in~~ resentment.

"I met Mrs. Haskins in Doxon's," Margaret informed him on reseating herself. Her hands were flying before his fascinated eyes in a whirl of wools and needles. "And she's sending little Valerie to Miss Maple's after all. It's only two-ten a term, you know. I was surprised. But perhaps they're not so . . ."

He muttered something that sounded wordless. Only he himself knew that the basis of it was "Quite enough, too." How women *could* go on knitting at that rate . . .

"She told me the Prescotts were getting their outside done this spring. And theirs is rather better than ours, if anything."

Now he was up against it. "Well," he mumbled, "we'll have to see. Dare say I can manage it. Must see if our orders keep up, first . . ."

"Well, I *should* like an engine-red door," said Margaret wistfully. "If you can manage it, it's better to let Haskins know early. . . . Oh, Edward, how would you like that little table—the octagonal one, you know—over in that corner?"

"What?" exclaimed the alarmed and defensive householder, pulled out of a dream in which the room was a centre, a shrine, an inviolable haven of rest. Confound it, why couldn't women leave things alone? No sooner had you settled your defences ready to plan ahead, than they butted into them quite casually and knocked them sideways. "What's the idea of that?"

"Why, it will balance the room *ever* so much better. Then we should only need to move the table a foot towards the centre and your chair . . ."

He looked at her astounded. "My chair? You leave my chair alone!"

She gurgled fondly at him. "My *dear* old Edward, it would be just . . ."

"Never mind! You wouldn't improve this position," he said obstinately. He was now driven to the despairing conclusion that women had no feelings where order and decency were concerned. Novelty, change, anything whatever instead of a stable life.

Listen!" said Mrs. Instone suddenly.

He listened. That woman by sheer shock tactics could drag him anywhere, he thought, in extreme exasperation—in the wake of the last and lightest idea that flitted over her surface consciousness. He found it all quite unseizable. All momentary sensation, no feeling. . . .

"It's Rosemary awake," she exclaimed in something like triumph, and had vanished through the door before he recognised his daughter's cry. *Down*

She was down in two minutes. "I've got her off," she said placidly, and was knitting once more before he fully appreciated that the crisis was over.

Mr. Instone was really resting now. He was conscious of a black and frostbound world outside, of the light and warmth and colour of the room in the midst of that wilderness, filling his soul with peace. He had every right, moreover, to the way in which his middle-aged back and buttocks fitted in the chair of which, by immobility long repeated, they had worn thin the pattern. Incredibly lovely points of light glittered on the tall brass candlesticks above the red-bricked fireplace, glittered like stars to his half-closed eyes. The sweetness of his wife's face lowered above her knitting; the shadows flung in challenge by the fire, over the ceiling, walls and furniture; the framed groups, one of a football team and one of the opening meet of the cross-country section of his old running club, that, he knew, hung on the wall to his left—these quite without reason, but with a truth he felt to the marrow of his being, showed himself to himself as a fine, tired but gallant figure of a man. Nothing that assisted that result could be illogical or out of place. He welcomed all the evidence with a sweet, long-drawn pleasure.

"Not too warm, Edward?" asked his wife.

"No—no," he breathed slowly, sunk in that dream of heroic quality. He was nearer, appreciably nearer, the solution of that empirical jig-saw puzzle into which, like another God, he would one day fit his family, his car, his garden, his friends, the candlesticks and his athletic past. It was a scheme on a scale fit for a man like himself. . . .

"Oughtn't we to ask the Tollings in again?" asked Margaret thoughtlessly.

He saw the four corners of the base of his edifice fall apart, the noble pile rocking, rocking, falling. . . .

"Oh, botheration to the Tollings. . . . Yes, no, anything. . . ." he exploded desperately.

She was not startled or resentful. Instead she felt remorse. She knew what had happened. A little pleasant laughter chased about inside her, she who knew that her Edward had always been continually lost in surprise that the world insisted on taking an incalculable course, and would never for an instant stop to afford him the opportunity of realising his dreams.

Yes, she felt, she had timed her capture well, considering that she had been twenty-eight and Edward thirty-seven. She was firm in her conviction that he could not have lasted unmarried until he was forty. She looked back with a secret smile, knowing how well worth-while it had been.

He had sunk deeper back, from that quick point of irritation, into his dream. And he was reaching the stage when the future beckoned. Cautiously at first, but with increasing skill and boldness and invention, he would erect a magnificent superstructure on the foundations he had laid so well. This was where the mind of a business man, used to finding his way in situations where a hundred factors must be considered, had full play. There were many things to be done in the building of this fine future of his (a future that would, incidentally, show Margaret what a man she had really married). He began putting together a list of those things, and the fact that he had done this a thousand times before was a shadow behind his path, not across it. It was true, he conceded, that he had made approaches to the problem, but that was all. Now he was really grappling with it. He saw himself, as he lay firmly wedged in his chair, a man with a cool clear brain, directing his own destiny with magnificent certainty. And the destiny of his helpless family was bound up with his own. Otherwise those small creatures might have been open to the pity of the world. It was a fine thought. He saw himself kindly with it all, tolerant, with a forward, forthright view of his own, brilliant and perspicuous. He had travelled far and fast, but

He would not limit his horizons. There was nothing little for him. And the four winds and the sky would welcome the end of that long but triumphant journey. . . .

He looked slyly at the clock. This fine work of his had carried him appreciably nearer the time for his night-cap. It was a good feeling, to have earned it; though Margaret would not know and this was rather a pity. They would retire at eleven, and he had the exciting, the triumphant belief that if he waited till it actually struck it would herald a new era. He would have become his real self, and all these years which had been merely preparation would be behind him. No, Margaret would still not know, but his awareness of that now deepened almost to pleasure at his superiority when he thought how exactly as on ordinary occasions her actions and her words would be. She had no idea. But then, how could he expect her, his faithful but humble helpmeet, to have any idea?

Margaret smiled across at him. "Nearly bedtime, Edward," she said. She was still busy with her needle on some never-ending work or other.

"Mm—yes," he said. But two thousand words of his to her, he thought, instead of two, would still have given her no vestige of a notion. . . .

"Nine years between us," she remembered, in the last review of her active day, "it seems to make a difference. He doesn't even read so much now."

Edward listened intently to the fatal chimes, but his face did not betray that this was his hour. Instead he said, "It jars a little, doesn't it? It wants another square of cardboard, perhaps, under that front right foot. Remind me to-morrow, Margaret. . . . Yes, I suppose it's bed. M-m-m-r-r-r . . ." He stretched slowly, solemnly.

He thought stoically but with a certain pride of the duties that were to be fulfilled, before his full day could be considered over. He took precedence of his wife as he went to the door on the way to bolt and lock up. That was a husband's job. He conceived her as watching him with some awe, feeling that she really had a man in the house. She had to call the cat in, but the security of the house, security that had to be doubly sure, was in his hands. This routine might

be very different from the stuff of his dreams, but he could take it in his stride.

And still that fuller life of his shaped itself out as he went his rounds, thinking intensively, but noting on the way that the table was duly laid for breakfast. He didn't like being rushed for the train to town, particularly if there was a bit of fog about, and it was in the air to-night.

As he climbed the stairs, leaving a snuggery that seemed to him a personal battleground from which he had emerged victor against odds, another thought came into his mind, and he did not discourage it. As had happened quite a number of times before, it printed vaguely over his face an expression somewhat satyrish, faunish. "Well, she is my wife," he thought persistently. "And if she knew what I really am . . ." Anyway, it would need only that to clinch their relations once more, and to establish himself on the personal peak he had won. Yes, that was it, clearly. Then, he knew he would sink to sleep and to-morrow would be a clean, unspoiled shining day. His new life would commence in earnest.

His wife stole a side glance at his face as he turned to enter the bedroom, and another to make sure, as she entered. Well, she would be ready for him. . . . Men were children, and it was hard not to laugh at him, or get irritated sometimes. Him and his dreams and his actions. Well, he had what he really wanted, and, she told herself again, he'd never have held out till he was forty. And altogether for her part, she'd still say it had turned out well worth-while. . . .

#### L. A. PAVEY.

Is Civil Servant. Author of several novels and two books of short stories. Was contributor to *English Story: First Series*.

# LAND OF PROMISE

by

## DOROTHY BAKER

THE solid sea, her mother's cottage, the shop and cutting the bacon, and being nice to the customers who wanted it done so finely, these things grew up like walls about her, shutting her firmly into the village. Yet war had brought changes to most of the folks she knew, even to the shopkeeper. Often Edna thought of Mr. Phillips whose shop stood on a road that led only to the sea, who spent his life between shop and chapel—and that three miles inland—so that his back had grown round, bent always over counter or prayer-book. All he cared for besides the sea was the ice-cream he used to sell in summer. And now, to her astonishment, he had hung his overall behind the door and was wearing a jaunty hat, and a collar that maybe girls would want to touch for good luck. But although Mr. Phillips had gone and every house taken for miles around, with all sorts of city folk and strange children everywhere, war had merely brought more work for her and no errand boy and the new customers difficult, wanting things sent; and there was no bus going to the port now and no young men in the villages. It would be nice to join up, to go away to places she had seen in newspapers, places where girls in smart uniform laughed together; and never work in the village any more or hear the waves daylong on the rocks. She stared discontentedly out of the window.

Across the fields in one long steady upward climb a soldier made his way towards the cottage on the downs. Fawn against green he moved neatly, without hesitation, towards her, vaulting the low stone hedges and straightening himself each time to start afresh on his upward way. He stood a moment at the granite gatepost, then walked the dead sunflower path and knocked on the door sharply.

Edna came down to the kitchen to find the soldier already

drinking tea. He was a very young man, brown and straight, with a brittle way of standing that told of the effort he made to be standing at all. He looked more tired than anyone she had ever seen. Lines of weariness dug down to the middle of his cheeks and his eyes were far into his head, like a child's that has not properly awakened from sleep; dark hair, damp and tangled, ringed his broad forehead. He had stood up when Edna came into the kitchen, shuffling clay-caked boots, and he seemed so remote and stiff that she thought of drowned sailors she had seen cast on the beach.

Her mother was delighted with the young man—she had no doubts about his reality. She told her daughter, "Fancy now, a soldier on leave—wants to know if we can put him up. Come from right up north to see Cornwall." She addressed the soldier, "And what I say is, it'll be grand for us to have a bit of company. It's quiet enough here, these days," and she began to prepare breakfast, taking down the best cups from the shelf at the side of a new-kindled fire. She put out the cloth with the blue silk border, usually kept for Sundays, and cleaned hands black from fire-making on her dirty overall, and her hair was screwed into a grey top-knot and her quiet face beamed her desire to make the boy feel at home. Edna smiled at the soldier. She was glad she had taken the trouble to do her own hair carefully. Mother never minded how funny she looked. The soldier glowed gratitude. He said, "It's fine to have found somebody like this—straight off, without any fuss."

The young man was tired. The kitchen slipped continually away from him. When he could concentrate hard enough to make still the things around him, he saw uneven walls, a black grate, and a high brass fender shining distantly; and two countrywomen, chapter and verse of the same tranquil story, moved smilingly, working for his comfort. Far back as he could remember, others had decided his timetable, his place of being, his meals, how far he could go. And now, suddenly, he was free. One dazed hesitant flutter. Then he had homed to a far place, a place created from story, where cliffs and seas and shallow beaches lured from brick-shut reality the fugitive mind of a child.

In two days he had come five hundred miles. It was the

furthest possible distance he could flee from the camp, from the orphanage he had left for the camp, and for two days he had travelled south—till he had come to the very end of England. He had begged lifts in cars, on lorries, on the back of motor-bikes; south, away from a shabby city and the shriek of air-raid warnings and grey people who walked the streets; away from roofless buildings he had grown to look upon as terrifying symbols of his own homelessness. He had fled south from companionship of men, away from the barracks' routine and punishment for this and that offence; and lectures on the art of war and radio programmes cast to make men forget their own seriousness. For two days he had fled from all these things, and though body had come to rest, mind, drunk with movement, continued tiredly on, even in a peaceful kitchen that appeared to heavy eyes dear and strangely familiar—the beginning of a fairytale.

All he had escaped from, all ways of escape, throbbed through his head, though now he had dropped from the last lorry into a lane that led to a beach. Two days away from the north, and still the scene was grey, gulls, sea, sky and church, and even the whitewashed splashes of cottages grey in the early morning light; out at the grey sea's edge a convoy sidled, remote like birds on a roof-top. He kicked barefoot at soapy waves and stared at gulls as they turned slowly over cliff-edge fields, and beyond the treeless austerity of a village he saw the cottage folded into quiet hills, and he had felt a rush of affection for its solitariness and had hurried towards it.

He wanted to tell them how grateful he was because they had made him welcome. He said, "You know, I always imagined a little house like this for my home." Not that he really knew what home meant, being in the army and before that in an orphanage. He told them, "What I feel so fed up about is just when I thought there was a chance of getting a job and being on my own, I had to join up." He said, "What I pictured was a place to myself in the country, and some money to buy books. Of course, it you've been brought up that way, you know the snags, I suppose." Encouraged by close attention he went on, "What I think is—you only

really miss the things you've never had—but always wanted. And the war's put the lid on what I wanted all right." He said, "But there's plenty of others in the same boat, so perhaps I shouldn't grumble too much," and he looked up at them anxiously, hoping for contradiction.

Edna had never heard people talk so clearly about themselves. Queer he could tell strangers like them all he dreamed about, while she—she who simply wanted to go and see the world as he wished to come from it—couldn't find a single word to express discontents that came to her mind every morning, every morning ready for the shop. She listened absorbedly to the soldier's talk, till her mother interrupted. "It's time you were off, Edna. And I must be going as well." She told the young man, "I do a day or two's cleaning. Anything to help us out in these hard times." While her mother cleared away, Edna collected her father's books, dusty and unopened since his death—*Armarel of Lyonnese*, *The Basket of Flowers* and Wesley's sermons. "Old-fashioned reading, maybe," the mother said, "but good."

Even the customers noticed the change in the girl in the shop. She cut the bacon thinly and no longer sulked through the day, and the vicar's wife was delighted and said to the schoolmistress, "Why, Edna's getting used to that machine at last." The vicar's wife and the school teacher went off together, the vicar's wife whispering what a really pretty maid Edna was getting, though rather simple—and sighed and said but then, so was her mother, and had the schoolmistress heard about the young man who was staying with them? She had heard, she *had* heard it was a distant relation, she did hope it was all right. The schoolmistress scarcely listened; she thought Edna generally looked so heavy, just like a pudding, and now she had bloomed in a day. She sighed to herself, thinking of her own days spent in studying for examinations, and now it was too late to look radiant, even if there came a reason to do so, such as the pleasant elderly bachelor who had recently bought the Rock House. At her bungalow door she brushed grey hair from her eyes and turned to watch a young soldier who went elated towards the sea.

The long October twilight pleated itself into gradual  
E.S.

arkness as Edna and her soldier walked along the cliff. On the third day's leave the weather had changed from grey to blue and the sea roof had melted to a silky quilted flow. But now, at evening, cold air blew up in unexpected snatches and the grasses hardened, petrified by night. The two crawled beneath wire barricades and searched shadowy fields for mushrooms, and when a basket was filled they sat on rocks and watched the sea, the sea but three days old to him, to her as habitual as the air she breathed. The boy loved the sea so much that she no longer resented it shutting her in. She saw it as her soldier saw it and knew it was lovely. She told him stories about the bay. This was where the seals lived all the summer. Mother and baby had hidden in the creek. The father came out into the bay, playing in the water, showing off to his family. And to Edna, suddenly, mother and father and baby seal on the beach took on a new significance, so that she was shy to speak any more about their gambols. After her first hesitant talking the soldier looked out in the silence, where the moon embraced the black water. Except for a kindly, awkward girl he had the night sea to himself. No boat sailed. No sound but the waves, growing angry with the shore. He said, "I wish I could live here for ever." But she thought with longing of the town the soldier came from, so she said, "What would you do in a place like this?" And when he did not reply, "There aren't many ways of making a living here." He told her, "I'd find a way. I'd have a little boat and go fishing. I'd work hard at shoemaking to begin with. Then I'd save up and buy a boat."

If he'd really set his heart on it, she supposed that was what he'd have to do, though she couldn't help minding the lonely stormy times when the fishermen's wives waited nightlong for their men to come home. Shoemaking in a town, that would be cosy and safe. Aloud she said, "Perhaps, after the war, you could come and stay with us for a bit, just while you get settled. Though being a fisherman, that's a hard life, even for those who're used to it." He said, "It's a private life, that's all I care. You can go and come as you please and it gives you time to think."

He got up from the rock and stretched out hands to the sea, as though it were a fire and he warming himself. "To-

morrow," he whispered, "to-morrow I go back." If only he had touched her, taken her hand, or even looked at her, she might have said something comforting, or even have told him how much she wanted to go away herself. But he seemed to have forgotten her. So she sat on the rock with her hands awkwardly at her sides and stared at dark stones below her, stones worn smooth and tossed into random heaps by the high authority of the sea; and in their meekness was something delicate and simple, unlike the jagged rebelliousness of the young man. She was quiet for so long that he became aware of her own sadness and knew that he had failed her, and he, he was irritated by her waiting. "You're really very pretty," he said. "As long as I live I shall never forget you and your mother both being so kind to me."

Girls had no place in his dreams, he didn't want to share with anyone; he looked confusedly down at brilliant dark pools, silly private seas with anemones and shellfish and frayed tufts of sea-pinks and maybe little fishes asleep beneath. He asked her, "Have you ever seen an octopus?" Fishes, birds, plants, and the whole wide sea, these things lured him, more mysterious than human faces.

Two weeks since, the soldier had climbed to the cottage, to the warm hearth, kettle and teapot on the hob; blue-banded tablecloth, a Wesleyan row of books, and from every window the sea. Two weeks away from a soldier's life, in the peace of a village; where folks were kind and friendly and the vicar a harmless old man who went on Home Guard duty carrying a walking-stick and a packet of sandwiches; where coastguards told leisurely stories of wine wrecks in the times of peace, of men reeling days together on the turnpike, who never touched a drop unless the Lord cast it up from the sea. But two weeks is a long time for a soldier to be taking his ease. The vicar stopped Edna's mother on her way from cleaning at Trevail's farm. He asked her, "Hasn't that young man gone back yet?" Edna's mother stood before him, her basket on her arm, and looked pleasantly past him into the road. "Not yet," she replied, "not yet, soon," and smiled her candid unrevealing smile and pushed past him with no more talk.

In his first days at the cottage the boy had called her

mother, had tried to help in the house, had carried coal and lit fires, and he was the son she'd always longed for, and there was nothing she would not do to make him happy. But now he grew silent and absorbed, and when the house was empty he crept upstairs and sat inside the window that looked over a ragged tamarisk hedge and thrifty broccoli fields that flourished down to the cliff. He could no longer read, only watched the sea from his hiding-place. At night he went out in the darkness, never asked Edna to go with him, but slipped suddenly out of the door and crept miles across the fields and sat on lonely rocks far from the village, and watched the black sea with white moon weals on it, and everywhere so still and peaceful, as he had always dreamed it might be, no sound but the rush of waves and the soft swish of outspreading water as they fell back. And with every recess of the waves there was a minute of peace, while he waited with panic in his heart for the next wave to gather.

Edna and her mother sat by the paraffin lamp, waiting for his safe return; neither speaking of the anxiety she felt. Edna thought, If only he had gone away at the right time, if only he had lived up to his fine uniform and the admiration of the village, why, then she could have been happy and written to him, and he would have been a proper young man to be proud of and he could have come back next leave. And perhaps getting used to the sea, he would have noticed her. Not so the mother. Edna and her soldier were children, to be protected and cosseted, and though sensing her daughter's disappointment, she grieved chiefly for the boy. Edna was pretty and young. Edna would easily find other sweethearts. But the lad was shut in, inconsolably a rebel; would he ever find a way out?

When he returned from his walks he sat silently on the hearth. If he did speak it was to justify his presence there by past misery and describe places where he had spent his childhood, putting up brick by brick a cold house. While he talked on it closed over them and the warm room, and they shivered at its bleakness and his bitterness. They went to bed sadly, the soldier to dream of packs of hunting dogs. Shrill barks shattered down to one fancied thunderous

knocking on the door. Edna lay awake thinking about the boat and the fishing and herself to become someone to him in the dream-distant future. The mother's thoughts about the day's uneventful melancholy, and puzzling what she could find nice to eat next day, to try to make things more cheerful.

Mrs. Trevail, mistress of the Stone Farm, limped into the kitchen where Edna's mother was cleaning the grate. She shuffled over newspapers laid down to keep the floor clean and stood massively above the little woman from the Downs cottage. With all the power of her bright black eyes Mrs. Trevail glared at the bent back over the grate. Getting no response she prodded with her stick. She began, "My rheumatism's bad this morning."

"That's a great pity now, Mrs. Trevail. It's the time o' the year though."

"On top of that I've been proper upset." Then she could keep herself in no longer. "The police have been here," she added, "asking about your character."

Edna's mother replied vaguely, "The police? What they old police want with me?"

The farmer's wife spoke savagely, "You're the one to know." She asked, "Aren't you ashamed to be harbourin' a deserter?"

Edna's mother put down her brushes. She looked calmly at the woman who stood beside her.

"I do what I likes in my own house. Though I've always tried to please you in yours."

The farmer's wife, rheumatic twinged, grew furious. "Well, did you *ever*? And I speak for your own good only." She added, "You might get jail."

Edna's mother rose from the floor and took her coat from the peg in the hall. She walked straight out of the farmhouse door, down the lane untidy with blackberry bushes and tufted obscenely with Old Man's Beard. The lane sloped dejectedly down to the sea, and the sea rose up, a stern roof above the village; it was an indifferent ruined time of year, everything gathered, only husks and shells left to blow and rot. She had never known the downs and the village look so shabby. She thought, "As though it wants a good

straighten up." Wasn't it clever the way they found things out. Who could have told? She said to herself, "Boy, boy, what can I do to help you?" and she walked with small agitated steps over the rough ground, her basket on her arm and a rolled-up apron bouncing about inside. Up the sunflower path she came quickly to the cottage door. Inside, the house was neat, the fire burned red, 'but no sign of the soldier.

The vicar came strident over the fields, she saw him from her bedroom window. Without knocking he entered, and she went down to meet him. He said, "This is most distressing to me." He said, "They took him half an hour ago. Dear, dear. I fear you may have to face a charge of harbouring a deserter." He looked round sternly, as though suspecting other misdemeanours. He spoke patiently. "For all your simplicity, you must now try to realise the gravity of the offence. What could have made you do such a wicked thing?" She asked herself how many people knew, how many tongues were wagging in the village? Now she'd become a criminal, like *that* Lucinda who used to steal flowers from the farmer's fields. Somehow, she didn't *feel* bad; all she wanted was to give the boy a taste of happiness and mother love. What might an extra week or two matter if she could do that? She thought, "Folks make such a fuss about little things," not realising what is really important in life. Absently she bestowed on the vicar a smile of reassurance for the soldier. She said, "He was going soon, anyway. It's not like as if he was never going back." The vicar frowned angrily, irritated by such oblique folly. He said, "I'm ashamed that one of my parishioners should have let her country down. I hope God will forgive you."

Her thoughts twisted Godwards. Sure he'd see a bit of her side, too—that she'd only meant to be kind. The boy was a stranger and she'd taken him in. Wasn't that the right and Scriptural thing to do? The vicar's exaggerated anger made him swell. He now looked too big for the kitchen. So she crossed the floor and opened the door for him to go, she who'd always gone regularly to church and listened dutifully, seeking to follow his advice when she got in a muddle with bills. And should she really blame him,

who had never known the lad, nor the bad times behind him? She closed the door on the vicar's broad stooped back, and stood frowning by the fender. She remembered the shop, and there was poor Edna, perhaps not knowing and serving out sugar or bacon to tiresome customers. Again she opened the door and followed the vicar across the fields.

DOROTHY BAKER.

Not long down from Birmingham University. Married.

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## THE WAYWARD ASS

*by*

DIARMUID KELLY

**T**HICK, muddy sweat flowed steadily down Mat's face, chest and back as he bent over the fire and stirred the treacly concoction which bubbled in the pot-oven. Mat sighed and panted and growled. The windows and doors of his one-room cottage were wide open but the place was like the inside of a volcano. Every time he straightened up to ease his aching back he raged at the walls, raised his clenched fist, and threatened to knock them senseless; he implored the windows to tell him what they thought they were doing just squatting there and not the faintest whisper of a breeze coming in; and he derided the two doors for standing gaping at him like a pair of amadans. When he bent over the pot the steam scalded his arms and face and the smoke from the fire made his eyes water. There was no hair worth mentioning on his head: two fluffy tufts on either side like bog-cotton over the ears of a Spanish dancer. His jowls were downy and his chin bristled. His head and face were a moist red and smudged with the dirt from his hands. As he changed his grip on the stirrer he wiped the sweat from the top of his head to his face, wrung his nose, carried on down his bare chest and dried his palm on the seat of his pants.

Grasping the stick with both hands he squeezed his eyes tight shut, clenched his toothless gums, and stirred with held breath until he was near bursting point. The mixture was thick, heavy and obstinate. His face was like a trodden strawberry. Breathless, he groped his way to the back door. Leaning against the door-post he gulped the moist evening air. It was neat whisky to his palpitating heart. His breathing became easier and he opened his eyes.

He gazed at the ass. It was standing, half-asleep, in the centre of the patch of ground which was Mat's backyard. Mat closed his eyes again and a demented smile curled up towards his lungs. The sight of the ass turned his inside to water and withered his tongue. It was always a torment to him. Now it was covered with what he called tender spots which nothing would cure, nothing but this infernal mixture concocted by Malachi Noonan. Tar and linseed, boil and stir, and a drop of turps to thin it out. He was thinning it out with his own sweat and blood. With quiet fervour he implored the powers of darkness to give him a pot-oven large enough to boil ass and all. But the ass was in the same place and the pot-oven was the same size when he looked hopefully around. With a lurch and a heave he slammed the door to and obliterated the sight of the ass.

Shoving his shirt well down into his trousers and tightening his belt, he eyed from his corner the panting pot-oven. Hard foot, soft foot, he sidled up to the pot and seized the stick. His two feet planted firmly apart, his bow-legs framing the pot-oven, he swayed from side to side with the tense flogged strength of a slave at the oar of a Roman galley. And every heave had its detested symbol: the ass; the mixture; Malachi Noonan. His lips ceased to form the words of his thoughts. The circles of thought spun and slid together, expanded, contracted, and then swung to and fro till inside him there was nothing but the swinging pendulum of the extraordinary effort.

His knees began to shiver and his legs to sag. But he persisted until he was in danger of swooning, in an ecstasy of exertion, into the boiling tar. One last heave and he staggered back to the middle of the room, where he stood softly padding on the cold steady flags, his vision blurred

with fear and exhaustion. Puffing and gulping in the sea of fright and rage he turned round and round. He sweated his muscles for the next assault. Then he saw the pot-oven. It was swinging to and fro. His hands relaxed. His head nodded in time with the pot-oven, following cautiously the shortening oscillations to the last shiver before it hung ponderous, black and harmless. When he was certain that it no longer moved he wiped his hands down his shirt front. He looked at his hands. They were very dirty. Spitting and wiping, he became absorbed in the difficult task of making them clean. When he was satisfied that they were as clean as could be he shoved them into his trousers pockets, moved over to the fireplace, and looked into the pot.

A long, calm scrutiny eventually convinced him that the mixture had been boiled sufficiently. He lifted the pot-oven on to the hearth. Bubbles rose on the surface of the mixture and burst with a puff of steam. Gazing at them Mat was reminded of porridge, black porridge; and he pictured himself ladling it out in a jail or some such place where they dish out porridge every morning. Malachi Noonan had specified a pint of turps, to be added slowly, stirring all the while. He poured in half the bottle, stirred, pondered, and decided to add the remainder. The addition of the turps reconciled Mat to the mixture. It was thinner now and easy to stir. It was a grand mixture smelling of tar and pungent turpentine. Bending over the pot he inhaled deeply. Standing erect and strong he exhaled slowly with his hands clasped fervently on his sagging tummy. Several times he paid homage to the exotic odour, his eyes closed, his bearing reverent, and his face adjusted to its most appreciative aspect. He made a silent promise to sacrifice a pint of stout to Malachi Noonan when they next met; a long, cool, talkative pint of stout.

He carried the pot-oven to the doorstep, and while waiting for the mixture to cool, sat down beside it and smoked his pipe. He began to think kindly of the ass. The poor ass, although it was a torment to him, was indispensable. It pulled the cart into the village, to the market, and to Mass on Sundays and holidays. And although it was always late for Mass it had an uncanny knack of finding its way home

in the dark when Mat was too drowsy to guide it or even asleep in the cart. Time and again he told the priest that it must be possessed of the devil. Yet, thinking about it now, he came to the conclusion that it simply didn't understand. It was an unfortunate poor creature with no one to turn to except himself, and he had the power to make it well again.

He poked at the mixture. He lifted a clunk out on the end of the stick, held it up to his nose, sniffed at it, and held it at arm's length. It looked cool. So grasping the handle firmly he semicircled from the front door to the back with the pot-oven swinging between his legs. The ass was standing in the same place and he carried the pot-oven down beside it. Stroking its nose and muttering honey words, he reached towards a bad spot on the hindquarters and touched it with the tar. The hide shivered and twitched but the ass did not move. The mixture was ideal. It was as easy to spread as butter and it clung like glue. Mat spread it thick on the sore spots, and dabbed it on all the moth-eaten places. He did not relax until he had scraped the pot and the ass was covered with an invulnerable layer of the potent mixture. Then he threw the stick over the hedge and sighed. His back ached and his arms were weary. A great sympathy for himself rose up in him and dimmed his eyes.

The pot could be cleaned in the morning. He left it there beside the ass and shuffled indoors. Rest was the only thing he desired and he was soon in bed. But before falling asleep he told God that he was an old man too tired to kneel down and say his prayers and that he was sorry for using bad language.

He awoke next morning at the usual hour; but with unusual pains in his arms, legs, and back. He sat on the edge of the bed afraid to stand up. Moaning and groaning he spoke tenderly to himself of his tribulations. He gently massaged his poor thighs and arms. Never again, he swore, would he lift a finger for the wretched ass. It could rot for all he cared and rot he hoped it would. He moved gingerly. He ventured to dress himself. Trembling he waited for a fiercer pain to assail him as he pulled on his shirt and trousers. All imaginable pain was in his face; there was no further pain in his body. He could move, stand up, and

walk. The discovery restored his indefatigable anger. He clouted the floor with his boots, scattering mud all over the place. He wished the floor was the ass's rump. Everything he touched was abused and ill-treated. He forgot his aches and hungered for breakfast. Putting on his hat he seized the bucket and went out for water.

It was a fine morning. He paused on the doorstep and blinked in the sunlight. There was a great singing and chirping of birds nearby. The ass was at the end of the backyard. It was a curious colour and seemed to flutter and move. Mat took a few quiet steps towards it and peered. It was swarming with birds of all shapes and sizes. Dropping the bucket he hobbled towards it, shouting and waving his hat. The birds screeched and beat their wings. The ass rose slowly off the ground. It floated upwards. It flew over Mat's head above his outstretched arms. The birds were glued to its back. It went higher and higher and a lark on its back was singing. It drifted towards the horizon. It went out of sight. Mat stared at the ground. The pot was still there and the inside was coated with tar. It had to be cleaned and it would be a tiresome back-aching job. It would have to go on the fire and be heated and scraped. He sat down on the ground beside it and began to cry.

#### DIARMUID KELLY.

Born 1917. Irish and a Dublin Civil Servant. Has done some broadcasting and has written about the ballet. This is his third short story to be published.

# MISS PEARL

*by*

HENRY TREECE

FORTY small eyes, quick and bright as a squirrel's, watched Miss Pearl. Crouched in their hard deal desks, twenty small boys and girls explored and probed every visible inch of their middle-aged schoolmistress.

They saw the thin hair, pulled painfully sleek as grey cotton from the tired head, knotted to a bun at the back, round and hard as an apple, pinned callously with shining forks of wire. They saw the thick glasses, green as the panes of an old shop-window, in their narrow silver frames, and the pale eyes that blinked behind them, faded as though washed for too many years in bitter salty tears. They saw the sharp red nose, rubbed sore at the bridge where the glasses chafed, jutting from the pale lined plain of the face; and the thin dry lips and the lined mouth with tiny whiskers at its ends; and the shiny frayed places at neck and cuffs of the trimly severe shirt-blouse, where the years had been too slow and the irons too hot; and the dark edges of the sensible tweed skirt that had been turned and returned until turning lacked point or reward; and the black cotton stockings, and the flat-heeled black shoes. And the dentures!

The dentures were wonderful, fascinating, magic! Large as a child's thumbnail, they seemed. Not white, not yellow, but a strange half-cream, and shining bright as dead bones. And above the teeth, thick pale-pink gums, as hard and alive as sealing-wax, a penance in the mouth.

As the sharp beads of eyes pinched and tweaked her tired body, Miss Pearl's mouth opened, and for a brief, exciting second revealed a wonderful strip of empty blackness between her upper lip and the gay gums. The children sat in ecstasy. Then the suction-plate went back to work and Miss Pearl spoke, rapping gently in time to her words with

a round black ruler, real ebony, the exact colour of a negro and the Black Prince's armour.

"Attention, please, children," said Miss Pearl, in a voice like paper roses. For the first time since they had entered the class-room, the pupils shuffled and began to whisper. Leave them alone, and their round searching eyes would keep them quiet. Try to engage their ears by sound and their elbows nudged sides, their hands twitched plaits and their knees made loose ink-wells dance in their little holes.

"Quiet, children, you must be quiet!" said Miss Pearl, ever so slightly louder, putting down her ruler and patting her thin dry palms together.

The children sat still again and watched, waiting for the miracle that one day would gladden the wet November mornings.

Miss Pearl went on speaking. "This lesson I do not propose to do any written work with you, or to play any singing games. Instead, we will start our new reading-book, the yellow one that the kind gentlemen at the Education Offices have sent us, *The Primary School Reader, Book One*. I am sure you will like it, every one of you, yes, even you, Philip. I can see you pulling Helen's hair at the back."

The small criminal withdrew the offending hand, letting it crawl back, as though in disgrace, to its innocent fellow, slowly and shyly, like an unwanted thing. As Miss Pearl went on talking, he sent an abashed, defiant glance towards his neighbour, a cheeky-eyed, red-haired lad from Pincher's Farm, where the pig manure always smelled so badly and the goats ate caramel paper. The two boys grinned to each other and were silent.

"Yes," said Miss Pearl, "you may grin, but you'd feel ashamed of yourselves, I warrant, if I stood you in the corner for the rest of the period, and did not let you read from our new book. Wouldn't you, now?"

The two boys looked down at their desks and smiled at their own defeat, knowing as children do the pleasure of being an example to others.

Miss Pearl spoke again. "Yes, children, I can assure you that you will revel in this book, every page of it. Why, I

took it home with me only last night, and read it through to see whether you would like it. And I don't mind confessing that I was absolutely enthralled by it. Yes, enthralled, children."

She wrote the word in big letters on the blackboard. The harsh chalk screeched across the outworn, greasy surface. Then it broke when Miss Pearl pressed heavily for the full-stop and there was a rustling snigger as she stooped slowly to pick up the fallen half.

She straightened herself again and leaned hard against the front of her desk, her pale eyes suddenly alive with a new pain.

"Philip and Frank, please give out the new books for reading," she said. Her mouth wrinkled up at the right side and the wonderful dentures clicked. She sat down quietly and looked at the deep hollows in the top of her desk. The valleys made in the soft grain of the wood by the caretaker's zealous scrubbing-brush. Every Friday night for twenty years. They were his epitaph. And hers was added to it in the thin layer of chalk that clothed the trough of each valley. ~~All~~ evidence of service that the thin bristles themselves could not reach and ferret out.

For five minutes, counted out on the plain nickel wrist-watch, Miss Pearl allowed the excited children to skim in and out of the leaves of this grand new book, like young birds, coming for the first time in their small lives to a summer wood. At last, when they had spelled out each story heading to each other and had tasted the brilliant colours of all the pictures, the lesson began.

"You will read in seating order, round the class, boys first," said Miss Pearl. "Each of you must go on until I tell you to stop, and try to enunciate clearly and distinctly. Now, don't forget, read with true expression and fervour. Pretend you are the writer of the story himself, putting down sweet thoughts for the first time in all the world, and see whether that doesn't make you read better than you ever did before. Eric, begin, please, on the first page. 'The Well of the Three Wishes.' Read the title clearly and distinctly."

Miss Pearl smoothed down the crisp new leaves of her

book so that it would not spring shut again, and followed the words the boy was reading.

"The Well of the Three Wishes," he began, then paused. "Many years ago, in an old part of the land, there lived an old man and his two daughters. His wife was dead, and so the old man's house was kept neat and tidy by his faithful children, who attended to his every want. . . ." (How true, thought Miss Pearl, how very true. Father, old and ill, sometimes so thoughtless in wanting the world—or rather, wanting us—to do his bidding and to go his way. And how hard it was not to, after Mother died. I found it especially so, being the elder, and the more domesticated, as one might say. But Jenny took more after her father. She was, perhaps, a little thoughtless, always getting into a temper for her own way, wanting to go to the dances in the next Parish Hall every Saturday night, and weeping her eyes out for new clothes every summer, all the way from Lincoln. I used to think that I was the better philosopher, sitting at home in the Rectory, listening to the old cracked rooks and the spiteful starlings, and watching the green damp creep slowly up the study wall as the years went on. . . . I knew he couldn't last for ever with a growth in the stomach. . . . Only another year, perhaps, I used to think, and then he will be with dear Mother. . . . Only another year, and then another, and then another. . . . And each year the damp crept a little higher up the wall, and more branches leaned down from the trees outside the windows to shut out the light. . . .)

The child's voice crept on, a little tired now. Miss Pearl looked up and said, "Thank you, Eric. Next, please."

Another child stood up, a stunted lad with chilblains and steel spectacles, his yellow hair cropped close to keep the lice away. "The magic of the well was so powerful that by wishing over it as they went into the house to bed, the two sisters were able, as midnight struck from the church in the next village, to fly away secretly, in the guise of white doves, to the elfin revels in the dell. . . ." (No, not both of us. I never went, thought Miss Pearl. Not once. How could I, when my dress-allowance always went to Jenny? Anyway, I always looked a perfect fright. She was the pretty one.

An' besides, I had never been taught to dance as she had. Being the elder, I always stayed with Mother, helping prepare sandwiches for the rectory teas and the rummage parties. Why, Jenny never even went visiting with me. I did it all, till Father was able to get a curate. No, the book is wrong there. Definitely wrong. . . .)

She spoke aloud. "Thank you. I don't think you read as interestingly as you could have done, James. Next, please."

James sat down, and as Miss Pearl's head bent again to her book, put out a clean pink tongue at her and sniggered.

"And so it went on, until one day a knight from far parts called at the lonely house for shelter. He was tall and fair, with . . ." (Curls, thought Miss Pearl. Yes, lovely, impish curls had the Rev. Thwaites. And the grandest blue eyes to match! He was just out of the Theological College, and this was his first job, or Father would never have been able to get such a curate. "Thwaites will be a bishop one day," Father would say. "If he plays his cards properly and doesn't make a fool of himself. He's got the men where he wants them, with his fishing parties and his cricket matches. And as for the women, to hear him talk they've got the finest babies in the county. And women always appreciate that sort of thing. Though I can't for the life of me see why it should be so easy to deceive them! Yes, Thwaites is set for a very useful career. I only hope he'll stay here a while, till I am fit enough to put on the old harness again."

Everybody thought the world of the young curate. Jenny most of all, I think. After he came, she was kinder to everybody, and would even stay in at week-ends so that I could go for one of my rambles round the lanes again. She didn't steal out at nights any more to dances in Gorsford Parish Hall. But she still borrowed my allowance, and bought more bright dresses than ever. Not that I minded. Not at all.

I remember those late summer evenings when we all sat round the big study window, or in deck-chairs, out on the lawn. It was a sadly neglected lawn when he came and started to put things to rights. But through the summer he worked hard with scythe and mower, even persuading some of the village lads to come up on week-nights and give

a hand with the roller and shears. And by the autumn the garden was looking every bit as fresh and neat as it did when we were children. . . .)

"And so, all things flourished in that shining, happy valley," stumbled the small voice.

Miss Pearl looked up at the class. The room was full of sighs and whispers and small scratching noises like the rustling of straw in a hutch. The children were tired of their story, and the bright-yellow books lay in forgotten attitudes on the deal desk-tops.

The little boys pinched each other beneath the benches; the little girls smiled and passed small pieces of paper along the rows.

The air was heavy with damp from wet clothing, with the flat smell of chalk and dusters, with the pungent preserving liquid that was sprinkled every week on the wooden floor-blocks. It was drizzling hard with rain outside. A winter wind blew against the walls on each side of the room. The tall windows had to be kept closed.

Miss Pearl rose and tapped with her black ruler on the desk. The children paid little attention. Once more she smacked her thin hands together and they were still. The glistening eyes reached out at her again, pinching and prodding her weary limbs.

"Silence, children!" she said. "Now see if you can sit quiet for two whole minutes, without moving or speaking or even whispering. I will count out the time on my watch, so you must fold your arms, sit up, and start being as quiet as little mice as soon as I say the word 'Go.'"

The boys shuffled their arms on to the hard desks; the little girls sat prim and stiff as umbrellas.

"Go!" said Miss Pearl, bringing her right hand down as though she were starting a real race on Sports Day.

The boys sat up, straight as chair-legs, in exaggerated goodness, holding their breath tight. The class-room was quiet as a cellar.

"One minute to go," said Miss Pearl, peering at her watch.

But Eric could hold his breath no longer, and exploded with a hiss and a cough. The tension was broken. All the

boys giggled and nudged each other. The girls unfolded their arms and turned round in their seats to see who had spoilt the game.

Miss Pearl looked very worried. The shining dentures sucked and clicked as she tried to speak sternly to the children.

"Children, children," she said in a quite shocked voice. "Have you no manners at all? I am ashamed of you, down-right ashamed, really I am. And you, of all boys, Eric! I shall really have to speak to your father about it when he comes with my milk to-night."

The class was shamed into silence. Arms were folded once more and backs were straightened. Miss Pearl's heart was softened. "We will try again," she said, holding up her wrist. "Now, if you can keep quiet for two whole minutes this time, I will allow you all out for ten minutes' break."

This time the class was determined. The second hand stepped slowly twice round its dial. Miss Pearl, feeling inestimably relieved, gave the signal that time was up with her right hand. She walked with dignity to the window and looked out on to the small concrete playground, glistening with rain. She saw the red railings were losing their coat of paint, revealing their rusty reality. She saw a drenched sparrow shivering by the drain.

"Children," she said, "I'm afraid the rain is too heavy for you to go outside. But because you have been so good, I shall stick to my promise. You shall have a break for ten minutes, but you must have it in the wash-room, in the dry. But one word of warning: behave yourselves and don't make the slightest murmur. If you want to talk, do so in a whisper. Don't stamp on the stone floor, and don't run about. I think I had better say, no games, save whispering ones. Leave the taps and towels alone, and above all on no account must you disturb the headmistress. Miss Tookey's room faces the wash-room, and she can easily look over her glass partition and see what you are up to. So, remember, be quiet. Be as quiet as you were just now and I shall be very satisfied with you."

The children stole out of the room, muttering to themselves at having to stay indoors. They shuffled quietly along

the corridor to the wash-room. Miss Pearl went back to her seat at the desk.

She picked up *The Primary School Reader, Book One*, and read on from where the last child had finished. ". . . and all in the old house were happy. Even the house itself seemed changed." (Changed? Yes, but not with happiness. . . . That went when the winter came, and the long evenings on the lawn were finished. No, perhaps a bit later than that. It changed for ever after the Christmas Eve service, when the three of us were coming back to the rectory for a glass of Father's port. The house was so very quiet when we entered. We thought Father had tired of waiting for us and must have gone to bed. But when we went into the study we saw him sitting in his old winged chair. Not asleep. He was dead. Oh, and his legs were so stiff. We knew we couldn't move him until the next morning, when we might be able to get Dr. Beazely to drive across from the next village. I remember, it was Jenny's idea to put a bed-sheet over him. Mr. Thwaites did it for us. I was too afraid to do it. But I think I was a little relieved as it was done. Yes, I remember, I was relieved. I remember saying, "Let us at least have our glass of port. That's what we came for, isn't it?"

And Jenny replied, "No. We came, that is, Arthur and I, to tell Father of our plans. We intend to get married as soon as possible."

I remember, I was very quiet for a long time. I could find no words to use, no thoughts to think. I only call to mind that I was then very tired, nearly exhausted, as though I had crawled all my life along a tunnel, towards a circle of light, and then, when I had reached the light, had found that it only marked the mouth of yet another tunnel, as long again, even longer. . . . I thought of the damp creeping up the study wall, and the dank grass, and the old rooks screaming in their dry twigs. And I saw that life must always be a thing of pain for me, for I was forgotten of God. And so I said, "Well, let us at least have our glass of port. We can celebrate your betrothal."

It was perhaps a thoughtless thing to say, there in the study, on Christmas Eve, with our father lying stark in his old chair, covered with a bed-sheet.

•Jenny shrank away from me, her face set with horror.  
“Not in this house of death,” she gasped.

Mr. Thwaites coughed, and said that he thought we might forget the utterance, coming, as it did, from obviously overwrought nerves. He arranged by phone for Jenny, as the younger, more excitable sister, to spend the night at the Black Bull, saying that he preferred her not to pass the night in the house after what had happened. I was to stay and have everything ready for the doctor when he came in the morning.

I remember the bells ringing out that night, for no one had told the bell-ringers that there was death at the rectory. In the morning everyone would be happy with cards and presents, and the children would have their trees covered with bright streamers and glass globes. I lay thinking about these things, on the rug in front of the study fire, and went to sleep when the logs had fallen to white ashes and the room was cold.

The doctor woke me when he came, with the jangling of the old brass door-bell. He was surprised to hear that I had spent the night in the study, but I told him I felt that it was the least I could do. I had watched Father for so many years. Besides, I felt I had to make up for thoughtless things I had said. . . . He smiled at me and said I really ought to go away somewhere for a rest. . . .

They were married in the spring and went away on their honeymoon to Syke. When they came back, Mr. Thwaites got a good living in Cumberland, and a new man, with a big family, came to take over our rectory. I didn’t feel inclined to live on their generosity, or to be a burden to anyone. . . .

Miss Pearl had forgotten all about the book and was gazing at the rain-smeared window-panes without seeing them.

The door opened suddenly and a red-faced young woman almost ran in. It was Miss Day, the new certificated teacher from a college in London. “Miss Pearl, Miss Pearl, whatever are you thinking of,” she said loudly. “Don’t you know what has happened? Haven’t you heard? The row was nearly enough to wake the dead. •And Miss Tookey is perfectly furious, and I don’t blame her!”

The tired school-mistress stared at the young woman. "What is it, my dear?" she whispered. "What is the trouble?"

"What's the trouble! Why, Miss Pearl, how can you sit there in your right mind and ask what the trouble is! What can you have been thinking of? To let a gang of young rips out an hour before their proper playtime, and into the wash-room, of all places! It's asking for trouble. Even an uncertificated teacher should realise that! Well, you've got trouble. Eric Salt tried to duck one of the girls in the wash-basin and has split her head open on a tap. There's a gash in her scalp an inch long and nearly a quarter of an inch deep! If she doesn't have to have a stitch it will be a wonder to me! Blood all over the floor, the kids yelling like blue murder, Miss Tookey in a flaming rage, and you sitting calmly here, reading a kid's book and asking what the trouble is!"

Miss Pearl's lips trembled and the black gap appeared in her dentures. Her throat moved up and down. She put up her thin hand to give it courage. But the hand was shaking itself. She spoke at last, with a click and a suck. "Oh, I didn't know. Really, I didn't think anything would happen. I told them not to play games, really I did. They looked so tired. I thought . . ."

Nothing annoyed Miss Day so much as inefficiency. She looked disgusted.

"You thought, did you? Well, I shan't be surprised if to-morrow you are thinking where to find another job! And at your age that won't be so easy, especially without a reference!"

Miss Pearl's mouth dropped right open and the black gap widened. She gasped and her eyes flooded. She swept out her hand blindly for her handkerchief. *The Primary School Reader, Book One* fell to the floor, a blurred wafer of yellow against the grey chalk dust.

Miss Pearl was afraid and ashamed of the tears running down her face. She must not let Miss Day see her weeping. To hide her tears, she stooped forward from her chair to pick up the book, fell headlong, and lay still.

The girl looked at her for a moment, in contempt,

assuming she was shamming. Then she noticed the stick-thin arm bent painfully underneath the quiet body, and the spectacles hanging foolishly from one ear. The girl was suddenly afraid.

She shook the older woman by the narrow shoulder. "Miss Pearl, Miss Pearl," she said. "Get up. It will be all right. Get up! We shall be able to smooth things over, I'm certain."

Miss Day heard a suck and a click, and saw the great teeth slip slowly from their retaining roof and the black gap widen. She ran screaming along the corridor.

After a time the children, no longer bored, crept quietly into the class-room, moving delicately, like young deer, ready to start away at the slightest noise. They stood in a circle, staring in wonder at the wide-open mouth, and at the strange new face of Miss Pearl.

#### HENRY TREECE.

Born 1912 in Wales. Has been dance band pianist, artist's model and schoolmaster. Now in the R.A.F. Co-edited the *New Apocalypse* and *The White Horseman*. Recently published a book of poems called *Invitation and Warning*. Is one of the foremost younger poets. A story by him appeared in *English Story: Second Series*.

# THE FAILURE

by

REGINALD MOORE

THEY sat at breakfast, old Joseph Blair and his wife, in a room that was of Victoria's reign. Each piece of furniture had been acquired for its dark wood, its obedience to a domestic scheme: the couch, with its ridged arms that ended like scrolls; the massive sideboard freighted with whisky, biscuits, glasses and cutlery; the table and chairs. Morning light filtering through the lace tracery of the curtains was first mellowed by the glossy mahogany, then became the persistent staleness in which the old people felt at home.

Sitting there, they were aware that they lived in a district which would never change as most of North London had changed. On both sides of the long winding main road from Holloway onwards suburbs were caked together in a final stage of over-development: cinemas, pin-table saloons, snooker halls, greyhound tracks and standard-price stores stood at everyone's door.

This was not for them. They lived in the era of the first small shops. Single-decker trams crawled like red caterpillars up the last stiff stretch to the Palace grounds, trains were somewhere near, but Palace-view Road remained sober and quiet.

It was true that few of the tall grey-brick houses still belonged to one family, but Joseph, when looking across the street to the other row of houses on a lower level and visibly apartmented, always had a quickening of pride. He was one of the rare owners. At home, as in his business, he was eminent. It was solid proof of all that he had ever said about men of merit—and their opposites. He felt this especially when he gazed across at Number Eighteen.

Emma Blair watched him wipe the porridge off the still gingery prickles of his upper lip. She made to get up. "I'll

fetch your hat and coat, Father," she said. A prim woman with an altogether unbowed figure—yet she was in her seventies, four years older than Joseph—she was betrayed only by her head, which, like a dead fruit poised tremulously on a withered stem, shook constantly. Her hands, though the veins under thin flesh appeared bluish and clogged, gripped the back of her chair confidently.

"No . . . no, Emma. I'm only going across the road. Just across to Number Eighteen."

"You're not going, going to the city—not going, Father?" Her crinkly mouth pursed in wonder: she stared.

"Not to-day," he said.

She took her seat again, picking up crumbs between her brittle nails. "Another cup of tea then," she said. She was waiting.

Joseph did not explain himself till he had finished his toast, sipped away his tea. He spoke thickly, carelessly, as though he were not asking for her opinion but was favouring her with his decision.

"I'm giving George his last chance," he said. "If he fails in this—as I fully expect him to—and Maud still stays with him . . . then I wash my hands of them both. You know how much I've done for them. Ever since they married I've helped them along. It was George's family sent him to America, but when he came back with his tail between his legs, his garage and money all gone, who was it put him on his feet again? And who got him into Lyons', and King's Cross as a porter, and driving a lorry for Charlie Dobson? Weak heart! That man's trouble is a weak brain—and he's bone lazy. Great fat ass! Some people don't know what it is to really *earn* their living. Everything's given them——"

"What," said his wife, in her trembling tone, "—what are you going to do for George, Father?"

Joseph Blair got up and turned to the sideboard. On the side lay the clean white handkerchief with which, for several minutes, he blew his nose each morning. He did not smoke or drink, but even so his nose had to be carefully attended to: London air was polluted, a nest for colds. Between blows and gasps Joseph told her what he was going to do for George.

She said nothing. She too had risen, but instead of patiently carrying away the breakfast things, was standing at the window, looking up the slope of garden to the two poplars against a low wall. Beyond, over a great rolling spread of parkland, the Palace stood gaunt and deserted. The sky was grey, shifting moodily east.

At first Joseph thought she was meditating a word of praise for him. Then his shrewdness, which was his endowment in place of understanding, told him otherwise, and he was prepared when she said, without turning round: "Your business has made a lot of money for you in the past, Joe. Can it still go on making money?"

"Don't be silly, Emma." He blew his nose again. "I've put by enough for us to live on in our old age, that's all. I'm a provident man. The agency is a steady little business. And wool isn't something which has soared, as you seem to think, and now finished. Not one man in a million would get the chance I'm going to give George. It amazes me you don't see that. . . ."

Emma did not reply. But it seemed, as she stood there gazing up the garden, over the park—even beyond the weather-beaten showiness of the towers and the vast empty hall of the Palace, right into the grey mystery of the sky over London—it seemed that she might be seeing much that she could never speak about, to anybody; even to her own daughter Maud.

Joseph blew his nose for the last time vehemently and went out to the hall.

Every time Maud Bowler came into the dingy parlour from the scullery, with a worry on her tongue and her bony face, with its wide blue eyes, very downcast, George, sitting at the table with the crumpled morning paper open again before him, read out some advertisement which struck him as ludicrous, and a sudden loud laugh burst from her, the laugh she had not known existed within her until her marriage.

George too was laughing, his big unfortunate mouth gapping the folds of flesh which were his chins. Only the upper part of his face showed the vicissitudes of his life:

twitching eyelids over the dimming gaiety of his vision, his flat head with its hair falling helplessly away.

"Oh, Gee-Gee!" Maid cried, "you're such a one! But I shouldn't—" she gasped, trying to recover sobriety, "I shouldn't be giggling. What are you going to live on? You say there's nothing at the Exchange for you? George, it's serious!"

George's resonant voice, a little cracked now, also gave up. But some ghost of humour was still about his eyes. He looked straight up at her and then nodded towards the scullery. "All right," he said, "let's finish it. Till death do us part . . . we'll part. Put our heads in the gas-oven."

Her face took on horror. Then she thought she understood his eyes. She forced down the corners of her mouth to prevent herself roaring again. "George—Gee-Gee—be serious!" she pleaded. But the words lagged. Through all her thin being she pined for full release into laughter, their kind of laughter. It was silly, perhaps, but in uncertainty and hunger, against collapsed hopes, it had been her faith, her physician, the bond between them. Sometimes even now she credited that their laughing together would suddenly call up the miracle—a rich man on the doorstep who would really know what George could do well, something he had not tried before.

George was looking down the SITUATIONS VACANT column. Each day the items became as familiar to him as the scrap of prayer he mumbled to himself stretching on his back in bed; but he read the column over and over in case his too accustomed eye had slipped the sort of incredible offer he often dreamt of: *Man wanted. To take a job being himself. No credentials required. Modest living guaranteed.*

This morning, however, there were the usual two and a half columns for stenographers and girl assistants; the one or two requests for specialised men. He passed to SITUATIONS WANTED. "Journalist," he read out slowly, "twenty years experience on provincial paper—seeks Fleet Street post." He brooded on it, grunting. Then he said, "Maybe that's what I wanted to be, a journalist. I don't know. Dad was a journalist—I've told you, haven't I? But I was my mother's son—oh, definitely! And she wanted me to be quite different

from Ernie and Ralph and Bertram, who all went on the Press. She was romantic, Maud. She figured me as an adventurer—that's why, I suppose, before she died, she dished out the cash for us to go to the States. But you know all this, don't you, Maudie. . . . It's funny, though. Me an adventurer! She must've thought of me roaming the Rockies or trapping in Hudson Bay or something. We didn't get much farther than a gas-station in New Jersey, did we, Maud?"

"It wasn't your fault they closed up the road," she said chokily. "You didn't know about them building that new speedway over by the flats. How could you?"

She started round the table, meaning to pat his shoulder or kiss his forehead, but a shocking clamour from the cheap bell behind the dresser prevented it. Someone was at the front door, below.

Maud darted to the dresser and flung open a drawer. She pulled out a green accounts book. "He's been asking for it for weeks," she said. "How much, now—how much?" She turned the pages frenziedly. "If it's over a pound we shan't be able to—"

"Who's this?" George asked. "The milkman?"

"No, fishmonger. Dale's."

"It may not be," George said. "Perhaps it's your father, wanting me to go in with him. Shall I accept?" He laughed, but this time through his teeth.

Maud sped out of the room and he heard her feet on the stairs, at first with a sharp wooden echo, then more distant, dying. Alone, his eyes slackened, his cheeks drew in. For distraction he looked around to catch the time. But they had no clock. Only an egg-timer stood on the dresser. This petty frustration was terrible: it struck him down. His mouth widened as when he laughed, but now he began to cry. He hid his face. How could he live? For what? He was no earthly use. He was finished.

Maud was coming back upstairs, and he smudged hastily at his eyes. Was there someone with her? He listened and thought he could make out the flat stamping steps of an elderly man. The fishmonger? Or was it, after all, the milkman?

The strain of wondering had grown into a headache before the steps were near enough for him to know who it was.

Emma stood so exactly in the same place before the window, looking out, that she might never have moved since Joseph left; only, instead of a white cloth, the table was now covered with a cloth of wine-red plush, upon it a brass bowl containing an aspidistra. This morning, more than ever, the view from the window brought her mind alive. She could no longer think of things whilst going about her housework. If she tried, her thoughts would run along queer ways, and without being fully conscious of herself she would start behaving as though she were in her nursery again and Teddy Bear and Blue Dolly and Blink the Cat were there waiting to be talked to. The realisation that she was kneeling on the stairs, cleaning the brass rods, or stretching her arm over a wall of the unlit hall, dusting, dusting—and that no one, not even toys, were there to hear and understand her—brought her as if bound and gagged to the brink of a precipice, and she could sense that down below were waters so deep and sunless that to be tipped into them would mean an eternity of shock and never death.

So she could not allow her thoughts to work on nothing in her head. Looking up the garden she could peg them out, move them here and there until they checked out and something was clear to her.

Now she had placed Joseph on the grassy slope, Joseph with his business, his greed and his fear: Maud and George too. Would Joe be retiring if business were still good? It would kill him, she thought, to leave a flourishing office. He'd want to sell it to somebody and feel that he'd extracted more from it than it could yield the buyer. Why this gift to George, then? It can only be that things are getting worse. Prices are too low: wool is too plentiful. The market is dropping.

What is he after? Maud, it must be. All our children are far away, we scarcely hear from them nowadays—those still living. But Maud . . . Maud is near: he made sure of that by paying for their rooms for a few weeks. I'm lost

to him because I can give him nothing more, neither respect nor children. But Maud. He believes he can have her if she can be persuaded that poor George is incapable even of keeping a good business going. He wants to keep her, putting her in debt to himself. Then he'll get settled in his chair in the front room and never shift. Maud will be living his life for him.

Emma drew one finger down the rim of the window, wiping off specks. I can do nothing, she thought. Nothing. George is simple and destitute: Joe has the money-brains. But who will ever know the truth? Dust. Everything turns to dust and dust is blown to the winds. I'd like the wind to speak all it knows. Over the seas and across the world. Everyone should know Joseph as I know him; then no one would be his.

Pushing back his chair, George tried to rise like a master of the house.

"Lolling at home as usual, I see." Joseph Blair stood full in the door, keeping Maud from entering. His umbrella hung from his arm. His square-topped bowler made his face more angular and determined.

George felt himself melting into inferiority. This was no house—it was a room: rented, not his own. He knew that he was in his shirt-sleeves, that being so bulky he could never look dignified, that everything about himself was disgracefully slack. He blurted, "I'm not here of my own choice. I wouldn't be here if—" But nothing he could say would contest the flushed and disapproving old face, the black-coated aplomb of a man of business.

"All the same," Joseph Blair said, easing off his hat, "I've come to talk to you for your own good. I believe no man's thoroughly useless. You've had a lot of small jobs, piffling jobs, and they've made you bitter. I know, I understand. Don't think that I haven't any idea of what you've been through. So now I'm going to give you a real position—see what you make of it. The best start you've ever had."

"Start?" said George. He had heard the word so often; and he was still so far from it.

"Yes, and I mean a start. In Joseph Blair's office. You're

going to buy and sell wool. And on your own account. I'm retiring to-day, I've had enough, and I'm going to let you carry on for me . . . ”

Maud had managed to wriggle past her father. She laughed and cried, then flung herself on him and laid her tears on his familiar-smelling clothes. She was past thanking him just now, but as she clung to him she shook his arms in almost mad gratitude.

Joseph Blair looked over her head at George. George was picking at the tasselled fringe of the worn tablecloth. Glancing up and meeting the old man's gaze he murmured, “It is very good of you. Very good. It's a fine start—” But he did not know what he was saying. He wanted to disassociate himself both from his father-in-law and from Maud. Together, in their different ways, they were trying to force him. He saw Joseph walk to the table, and with the half sigh, half groan of the aged, lower himself into a chair. “The whole business is yours,” said the old man, “I'm giving it to you.”

No! he wanted to say—no! I don't want it. I shan't take it. Keep your business. I'll kill myself if I fail again. And you'll make me fail.

But now Maud came to him. Her voice was high-pitched, and she was laughing still, but with none of the old desperate laughter: her hysteria struck a note of ghastly relief, as if at this sign of comfort and moneyed peace she had thrown aside all that was staunch and enduring and had put on a mask the old man had handed her. “You funny, funny old thing!” she cried. “You see, Gee-Gee—didn't I tell you? Someone has faith in you. It's turned out to be Dad! You'll be a wonderful business man.” She pressed him down into his chair, after kissing him gustily on the cheeks. “A cup of tea for the three of us,” she said, almost out of breath with gladness; “we'll drink a toast—to Joseph Blair's, run by Mr. Bowler!”

She's making herself absurd, thought George, yet knowing that in this brief time she had taken a stand of her own against him and against all their poverty. He glanced across at his father-in-law, but could tell nothing from the old man's expression. It was grim as always; only his elbow

set firmly on the table suggested he had just brought something off.

George sat there in vain hating him. When the tea was placed before him he raised his cup. "To you, sir—Joseph Blair's," he said. I wish, he thought, drinking, this was poison.

Maud had sat down with them, at the head of the table. She bent forward eagerly, looking up into her father's face. "Do tell us, Dad," she said. "All about it, and what he's got to do. Oh!" screaming again in hysteria, in delight, "I never dreamt—" and the laugh on her lips was a sob, she said how good he had been—but they had never expected so much as this: they were more grateful than words could express. He knew, didn't he? He could feel how grateful they were? "Now, Dad, tell us—" She paused to sniff and cough a little, then went on, feverishly bright again: "Go on and tell us: what George will be doing and everything. It's so new. Isn't it, Gee-Gee? So new and unexpected. . . ."

The eyes of the two men met for the second time. Then the old man cleared his throat importantly, began talking.

It seemed to George, as he sat in the little city office four months later, that Joseph Blair had never stopped talking. A copy of the *Wool Trader* was open in front of him, but he read it desultorily. Every now and then he would glance up and look around the office as if someone had called him, and the air of the place, its sealed doom, would suddenly be filled with that hard old voice telling him how the business had been built up, its procedure and conventions, the reputation it had made. And when he did look down again he would see on the pages Joseph's twig of a finger rapping out a point.

George was alone. He had given the young clerk his last wages a month ago. He was alone with a copy of the *Wool Trader*, which told him all he wanted to know—the information Joseph had withheld.

Only two other things caught his attention during the hours he sat musing: one was his cheque-book, spread out over the ink-wells. He wasn't sunk yet. About eighteen pounds left. And this was three days after the end of the

month—most accounts were settled. But what was eighteen quid, in business? A firm's assets—eighteen quid!

With this in mind, he would swivel round so that he faced the big window, the window that would have swamped the office with light, but for the ledgers and trays of sample-books stacked up nearly half its height. The window-cord was visible, however. It lay over the top ledger and dangled in a noose. The noose fascinated George.

Once he stared at it for three minutes. He could feel it tight around his neck. The ledgers and books were lying all over the floor—he had tipped them off with a few sweeps of his hand: only a step into the air was needed. Then his eyes began to ache. He knew that now he would be deserted; neither Maud nor Blair would have anything to do with him. For the last time he was a throw-out. Yet he did not want to die. Somewhere there was life; perhaps only a dribble of it compared with the great river most people floated upon, but life just the same, not a jab of pain, blankness, and all light vanishing.

This time he'd have to go on the road, become a tramp. That must be his destiny. He was no use as anything else.

George's head had sunk lower. Idly, unhappily, he was brushing the blotting-pad with his bulging chin: the pad was clean, good to his eyes. It made him realise suddenly how black and serious he must be looking. With a laugh he jerked back in his chair. On the road!—with him sitting here in this comfortable office, surrounded with such respectability: letters and accounts all filed, a name on the door. Couldn't *something* be done with all this?

That moment he remembered Bertie MacClure. It was a pity about Bertie. There was another man who had never found the right job, though he had a fund of ideas. Of course Bertie was a bit crooked. . . .

"All the better!" George addressed the ledgers, the files, the stolid back walls of buildings glimpsed through the chocked-up window. He seized his hat, thinking, Bertie will be in the Mecca, I'll pop along and speak to him——

"The office," said Bertie, smacking his lips over the sweet

coffee, "is a perfect cover for us. Y'know, I told you all this t'other week. But you wouldn't listen to it."

The café was below the pavement, a coolly-lit crypt of food and drink, and their alcove, full of soft shadows except where the table-lamp dimly disclosed their faces, lay in the furthest corner. Other men sat here and there. From another alcove a girl talked shrilly and excitedly, and a man kept trying to say, "Yes—yes," as if he were absorbed in her.

George said, "Had plenty on my mind," and looking at Bertie, whose knowing eyes were for ever squinting away tobacco smoke, who grew a toothbrush moustache that made his sensual mouth seem kind and humorous, he felt strong, assured. Perhaps he had always needed a man like Bertie for his partner. In the many jobs he had taken, and later received from friends and relations, men were fellow-workers who, by grim appliance, worked so much better, faster and more accurately than himself that his will was deadened, a strange obstinate detachment preventing him from doing even moderately well, and dismissal followed. And during these last months, among the men of his "trade," he had realised the impossibility of "getting on," living confidently, unless he could claim some of the deep-rooted hypocrisy and craft that made everyday business-dealing seem an honest living.

Bertie was shifty—*nothing to it, ol' boy: getting into transport is simply a matter of*—Bertie was by nature inclined to alcove discussion; he liked to bring out smart phrases like pats of butter until they became a great square-set scheme, netting thousands a year for each of them. But he could feel easy with Bertie. He could feel that way for the first time in his life. Because now, for the first time, he knew how to act and felt eager, not worried, about prospects.

"How much shall we need to start with?" he broke in.  
"That balance of mine. Eighteen quid. Enough?"

Bertie waved him away.

"Keep it, ol' son—keep it. Most of it, anyway. . . . A few quid, that's all we'll need, for travelling. Now, the principle's this. Lorries come to London every day. They bring stuff here—say, & from Manchester, Liverpool, Brummagem—

unload it. What do they take back? Nothing—very often, nothing, ol' boy! Now all we have to do is make ourselves known to the boys as transport agents. That's where your office comes in. A nice little office, central, with a phone—just handy for us——”

“Shall I keep the business on?” asked George.

Bertie looked pained by the simplicity of the question. “Why, naturally, ol' boy. Just keep a few little contracts going—at a loss, if you like—won't matter a jot. And meanwhile we'll be pulling it in on the side. Tell you how we do it. We need a bit of money just to make a few trips up the big roads. We drop into a pull-up here, a pull-up there, and get pally with whoever's about. The rate we get paid by is, say, one and threepence *per ton per mile*—we give the driver the bob and take three dee for ourselves. No limit, m'boy, to what——”

“I drove a lorry myself—for a while,” George said.

“You did?” Bertie's eyes nearly showed wonder. He rubbed his hands vigorously, as if to smear away the suggestion of such labour. “Fancy that, ol' boy. Should be useful, damn' useful. You ought to pal up with the boys pretty soon with that as a handle. Tell 'em what make of lorry you drove, what a mean lot of tykes the owners are—you'll get their confidence quick as knife. In no time we'll have a fleet of lorries other fellas are paying for. See what I mean?” Bertie chuckled.

“And when we've got the drivers. . . . How about the loads?”

Again Bertie fluttered a hand.

“Leave that to me,” he said. “I know plenty of chappies who want to send stuff out of London. This is going to be a solid success, Bowler.”

“We're in business for ourselves,” said George meditatively. “We've got nothing to lose.”

The waitress trod quietly up. Bertie warned with his eyebrows. “Couple more, please,” he told the girl, “nice and warm. Like you, my dear.” Then he bent forward, the lamp painting his face in rose. “Back at your office,” he said, “we'll go into the *whole* thing: the whole thing, from beginning to end—can't talk much here, ol' man——”

Along Palace-view Road the torn leaves slid fluttering to the walls before a bank of wind. "Go in, Father," said Emma Blair. "Maudie's just going—there's nothing we can do for them."

"Yes, Dad—I must go across now—the men have nearly finished. That's the bed, isn't it?" She glanced over her shoulder, as she stood with a foot on one step, the other on the one below; glanced to where two removal men were staggering to their huge van with a black-painted steel frame. It still looked strange to her, but she knew it must be the bed dismantled. She wondered whether she should have told the men to leave it. It could have gone straight to an auction-room or a second-hand shop. She had already chosen their new one with George: it would be waiting for them at Finchley. "It's very old," she murmured vaguely, "we've had it years and years."

Joseph clapped his chest where he had felt the wind strike at him. "I'd like to know," he said, "where George has got all his money from. Mine's a good business—but not as good as all that. It's not a year yet—and you're taking a house in Finchley. What's he been up to? I'm going to see about it. He's up to something. I'm not going to have him filching—"

"Joe—" Emma grasped his arm, and her nails dug into him: she was wishing momentarily for the strength to maim him. "Come inside. The wind's biting. And you're talking nonsense."

Maud looked at them both, and observing her mother's attitude found her indignation conquering the old awe and fear. "I should say so, Dad! It's not fair of you. How do you think George makes his money? You gave him the business. He's carrying on, that's all. And doing very, very well. Didn't you expect him to do well?"

"Hey! Missus!" The voice was faint, almost blown aside from their ears. "This! Shall we take it?" and over the road one of the men was pointing down at a chipped tin bath at his feet.

"I must go," Maud said quickly to the old people. "You've hurt me, though, Dad. You're so funny. I don't know what you're getting at—" She turned to her mother, addressing

her alone. "Write to me when he feels different, Mum. I shan't write to you, until. I can't get over him . . . such nasty things . . . and you'd think George was the last person . . ."

At the gate she did not look back or wave. She went straight across the road and they saw her speak with the man and go with him into the house again, the man swinging the bath carelessly as a thing no longer of value.

At last they also went in. Joseph did not know what to do when the door closed. He had never realised that a change of routine would produce such unsteadiness in his mind, fill him with so great a sense of unknown peril. All these months his thoughts had been fastened to the single track of awaiting the outcome of what he had set in motion. Sitting at the front-room window, he had watched the house opposite, picturing the day when his daughter would come across the road to say she was at an end with George, she was coming to live with them. And he had felt that this would right things, that in the future, without George's lumbering presence in the family, he would be able to spend the rest of his days within an atmosphere of respect and service.

Now Maud had been over. And what she had to say was the reverse of all he had been living for. Was it possible? He shook his head, frowning in chagrin and bewilderment. Still, he could hardly believe it.

At a loss, he followed Emma up the passage. "I shall have to see to this," he said. "I'll go up to town to-morrow, run my eye over that scoundrel's books——"

Emma stopped and looked at him. She was paler than eight months ago, but upright as ever, and her voice, though wavering, no longer came to an invisible wall. "You're too old," she said, "and you can't, any way. George owns your business."

Joseph had never once felt afraid of his wife. But now, looked upon by her, he swayed and was forced to clutch the banisters. It came to him that she was cold as death. Although she knew what this meant to him, how he felt—everything tangled and cramped inside him, his power dwindling—she would do nothing to aid him. She was a

cold, stiff figure on the crest of the wave that was sweeping his brain to terrible places. His wife, an enemy.

He said incoherently that it was still Joseph Blair and Company. It was still his.

"George is Joseph Blair & Co.," Emma replied quietly.

Then she turned away. It was hard to stay with this man, to suffer his fuming gaze that was so ancient, so futile. As always of late, she felt inhuman, a person who had died long ago but was condemned to remain on earth to watch the awful disintegration of others. Loneliness, which sometimes opened a door to insanity, she had dealt with. When she was not thinking slowly and calmly of something in particular, she would play patience on the kitchen table or take up her piece of crotchetting, and perhaps when the last faint reflection of the window was fading off the chequered lino, she would dare to sit just feeling the day and the night to come, that hour of sunset in some way surely hers.

She went to the kitchen now. Joseph shouted after her. She took no notice.

A weeping grunt came from the old man. He blundered in his wife's footsteps. Then, almost at the door, he understood that she had locked herself in—he could not get to her. He was shaking all over: he wanted to sit down. But he dared not be still. Hate, an obscure driving hate, moved in him like hot blood. He felt suddenly he could no longer contain it.

As he groped along towards the front room something else came into his groaning and mumbling—a husky whirr of hate and self-pity. He stood in the middle of the room, thumping the air steadily, with unthinking insistence. Everyone was against him. Why didn't the ceiling fall, the walls topple in? "Come on!" he yelled upwards, "drop on my head! Drop on an old man—you cowards!" He shook his fists at the judges around him, the furniture which had sat through his strenuous years—the staid chairs, the dark table on which light brooded. The feelings which he had been trying to utter were now loose in his brain. "'Sme—Joe Blair. Worked up from nothing. House is mine, wife's mine. All children—mine, mine! No one can cheat me and I can't die! You fools—say something—talk, talk!" He

picked up a chair and smashed it through a window. Gasp-  
ing for breath, he shoved it through the pane so that it fell  
out. The shouts from the street meant nothing to him. He  
could hear himself, and his own great noise was the noise  
of the world breaking up. "But it's not death!" he shouted,  
"not death, death, death!" All at once he switched round  
and caught sight of his grandfather on the wall. A picture,  
but the man was silently grinning at him.

"*Mister* Blair, my eye!" he sneered. His head thronged  
with words; and faces were there too, hordes of them,  
strange ones. "Cucumber! Rattlesnake!" Then he turned  
his back on the picture. "I'm sick of the lot of you," he told  
the room. "Clear out of my house! The Queen's coming to  
tea. Clear out! And leave my head alone! Oh, leave it,  
leave it!" He bent double with a greater gasp and was sick  
on the carpet.

At the front door Emma beckoned the policeman inside.  
For a second they stood listening.

"It was a chair," the policeman said. "He threw a chair  
out."

Emma felt the wall: it was solid. "It's Joseph, my  
husband," she said. "I think—I think his brain has failed."

#### REGINALD MOORE.

Born 1914. Edits *Modern Reading* and *Selected Writing*. Has  
published a novel.

# A MEETING IN BEDLAM

by  
L. J. DAVENTRY

**A**S he watched her preparing a meal for him he wondered what had become of the bond which once had existed between them.

All seems changed now, he thought.

His mother appeared to him like a figure in a film, moving about aimlessly, detached, remote, and when the food was ready he ate it mechanically, with no taste in his palate.

The world is a dream, he said, and I am the only living person in it.

My darling, she said, and looked at him lovingly and anxiously.

When at last he went out she stood at the window gazing after him and yearning for him. He did not turn to look back at her although the pain of her sadness was in his blood.

He was glad to walk down the street again. Indeed he was numb with wonder at the fact that he should be there, walking and wondering.

The frontier is only thirty miles away, he thought. It had seemed like thirty thousand miles away. He went into a tobacconists and asked for a packet of Woodbines. The small daughter of the proprietor was spread over one counter reading a coloured comic, and he touched her head shyly with his hand.

Mind you always carry your gas mask, he said.

She looked up at him gravely and nodded.

Her father, an old man with spectacles, handed him a packet of five Woodbines in a slightly furtive manner and, feeling a little ridiculous, he left the shop.

Farther along the road he met a woman he had known well in that other life. He had used to run errands for her,

but now she only nodded and seemed to look through him. He knew she was hurt because he had returned on leave whilst her son rotted in some mud-hole.

But that is not my fault, he said aloud, and glared back at a passer-by who stared at him.

He found the King's Arms open and walked into its fresh coolness, his heavy boots clumping on the stone flags. There was nobody there whom he knew and all looked at him strangely, he thought.

He asked for a pint of bitter and listened to the chatter of other customers in an adjacent room. This soon irritated him and he turned on the radio near his elbow.

Music had always affected him deeply and now, as he listened to Tchaikovsky, his mind relaxed and the soul of his imagination rode unchecked in the ecstasy of sound coming from the little brown box. After a while however the music's magic held him in the spell of drama so powerful that he became agitated, restless, and in a few more minutes had to rise and go, his drink half finished upon the table.

He walked without purpose in the gathering dusk, unseeing and unheeding, with an ill mind intent only upon evading itself. The sense of profound meaning he had assimilated from the musical box followed him and coloured his vision so that he did not see the girl getting out of the car until he had walked into her.

She had been laughing at someone on his other side as he approached but now as she staggered back the smile fell from her face and she stared quietly at him. She had a sweet face, with gentle grey eyes and a soft full mouth, and as he stared back at her he thought he had never seen anyone so beautiful before.

I have never seen anyone so beautiful before, he said.

That's a sweet thing for you to say, she answered; I personally have never seen anyone so unhappy before.

I do not feel so good, he said, everything is not so hot for me to-night.

Why don't you get drunk?

It's no use getting drunk by yourself, he assured her earnestly, but—if you will join me—

Are you coming, my dear? said a man's voice behind him.

He did not look at the owner of the voice but kept looking at the girl. She closed the door of the car and it made a great click in the oncoming darkness.

No, I am not, thank you, she said, I am going with this gentleman.

Look here, young woman, began the other man indignantly, but she said, I do not want to argue, I am going with him.

As they walked along he thought: I must not spoil it, I must not spoil it, this is the war and we must put our backs into it, army pattern one, soldiers, for the use of. How pretty she is. Well, now we must get drunk.

Where are we going? she asked.

To a little dive at the bottom of Silver Street where you can get drinks after hours. It is not a wonderfully clean place but the people who go there do not care about this, and sometimes you get music as well.

I hope it is still there, he thought.

He gazed at her across the table, and as he did so the darkness of his mind seemed to recede and lose itself under the magnificence of their being there together.

In the deep purple light, sang the other music box, and he said, So your name is Joan. That's a fine name. Where were you going when I bumped into you?

To some silly show, she answered. I'm glad you're looking happier.

Ah, shut up, he said, there's nothing wrong with me. I just can't get attuned to some things.

Bastards, he thought. Mangled, rotten, with life crawling out of the clothes.

It's not that I fear it, he said aloud, but it seems so wrong and *foul*. Bad, and yet not *bad*. I can't get the hang of it, he said, and looked so sad and strange that her heart seemed to leap into her throat and stay there.

What the hell are bodies created for? he asked.

This, that—or what? Why don't the people in the bodies come out and say: I am not interested, thank you. I want

to read my daily paper, do the crossword puzzle, kiss the legs<sup>o</sup> of my beloved.

Why don't they say: I want to go around in peace, in search of adventure yes, fighting yes, but fighting with my hands and my brain, not bits of steel and wood and aluminium, lead, explosive, filthy gases, and all the rest of the means to slaughter.

Perhaps it's because they are not yet grown up, she said.

I am a soldier, he answered, you must be careful what you say to me. I might set things going and get you arrested for speaking your mind. It's a free country, don't forget that. But you must not talk too freely if you want us to keep that freedom. Ha, ha.

Forget it, she said, let's get drunk.

There's a song in the air, sang the musical box. Later he said frankly: To tell you the truth I would be only too pleased to vacate this bloody sphere.

I see what you're getting at, she said. You can't because, well, because . . .

I can't.

Yes.

I must wait until some other rat does it for me because that's the way of it. Some truths run through the madness and that's one of them. Another is love. This night is worth all the insanity in the world because I love you.

I don't think I have any objection, she said in a low voice, and her eyes held a deeper blueness.

He called a waiter and said: More whisky, more hot rhythm. And laughed.

After having reached a certain stage of drunkenness it was the habit of this fellow to change back into the same person he had once been, a long time ago, before he had thought about this, that and the other.

The girl was charmed and pleased to see the difference.

What a terrible-looking barman we have, he remarked. He looks like something out of a horror story. If this was the eighteenth century I'd swear he belonged to Jonathan Wild and would be waiting for us with some other *prigs* armed with knives, after we had left.

He did not mean all this but it always gave him a peculiar satisfaction to speak in this manner when under the "influence."

He told her a silly story he had learnt about the A.T.S. and they both roared with laughter.

I said a kit inspection, he said. God damn you man, what's wrong with your ears?

They chattered about the Marx Brothers, the Ritz Brothers, Charlie Chaplin, cheese and pickles, a boat, and a desert island.

Later still he sang: I can't love you any more than I do, and drew the attention of the few who had not yet become resigned to the hubbub from these two.

Then suddenly she rose and he saw her hair shining from the light of the electric bulbs.

Let's go home, she said.

When he put his hand in his pocket in order to pay the bill he found he had only a bad two-shilling piece and six pennyworth of coppers, whereas the amount necessary was over two pounds.

This shock nearly sobered him and was only surmounted by the fact of the girl saying in a loud voice: You gave *me* the money, silly, and paying out in regal manner.

Illustrious One, he said with difficulty, after they had reached the street, there you have me in a nutshell. I take the most wonderful creature to a place of gaiety and after the revels find that I have forgotten the money.

The revels have not begun, she answered. Look, the searchlights are out to-night.

It was true, and he gazed up at them with a kind of bitter complacence.

I've finished shouting, he said. It's no damned use. I'm one of them, you're one of them—to hell with them. It's like being in a madhouse and feeling oneself going mad with the rest.

We're very small, he continued, except to-night. To-night in us is concentrated all the real meaning of the universe. You may think it is nonsense to say such a thing, but I do, not think you do, or I would not say it.

Go on, she said looking at him with a strange quietness pervading her limbs and mind.

Why, all else is sham except us, he said.

There is endless beauty in us, incalculable mathematics, profound philosophy. And when I get into bed with you there will be all the awfulness and wonder of the sky spaces.

When he had gone she went upstairs and stood before her mirror for a long time.

She stared at her shoulders, at her breasts, at her legs and then at her face. Examined with foolish minuteness her nose, lips, hair and the tips of her ears.

Then, as she felt the strength ebbing from her she went back to the bed and sank down upon it, waiting and praying for the relief of tears.

When they came the shadow of him was before her and the gauntness of his cheeks and dark sadness of his eyes flickered like the image of some poor skull found after the world had become a dead sphere. But the morning was nearly come, and with it the madness to go on.

#### L. J. DAVENTRY.

Born 1915. Was in the Army until discharged as unfit. Is married. This is his first short story to be published.

# NEITHER YOU NOR I

by  
ELISABETH KYLE

"Of course we'd love to have her, though her health always runs down in London. London doesn't seem to suit her at all."

The woman with the thick legs stretched out before her on the terrace countered that easily. "Perhaps the country air is better for her," she agreed. "But on the other hand to have the poor little thing mooching about all day by herself as she does at Badrock. . . . You know, there aren't any other children near us, and I sometimes wonder if she isn't getting definitely *queer*."

"She adores Badrock all the same. She's for ever talking about that little shell house in the garden, almost as if it had taken her mind."

"That's what I mean." The other woman, her sister, put in quickly: "Now in London she would have an opportunity of going to school, and she does love her walks in the Park! The old balloon woman seems a great friend of hers. Funny little object! Directly she came down to Badrock she asked where our balloon woman lived and seemed to think the place fantastic because we hadn't got one."

The two sisters relapsed into silence, musing over the delicate problem. Mrs. Heathcote's long white face had its original ugliness or prettiness blurred as though a thumb had smeared it over while it was still soft, leaving a mere impression that might be of good looks. She tilted her hat still further over it to protect it from the sun as well as her sister's measuring eye. Mrs. Blain's rough tweeds overhung her chair like an old coat flung down hastily. She looked away, then finally closed her eyes, disliking problems. The wide terrace was strewn with their belongings but no toys, since those the child kept in a secret place. Fortunately the child herself was absent. Down at the bottom of the

garden probably. Fiddling with her own concerns as usual, poor little thing!

From the bottom of the garden' came faint crackling sounds like' pistol shots. The gardener stooped, depositing another armful of summer's debris on the smoking bonfire. Out from a hole among the bushes popped a little girl, watching. Presently she came and stood beside him. The bows on the ends of her plaits just touched her shoulders and there was a scratch on her nose.

"When you're tidying up this place," she asked the gardener hopefully, "do you ever come across any shells?"

"Shells as far inland as this?" He shook his head. "What would ye be wantin' with them anyway."

"Oh—just to make a shell house." Her small squab hands sketched a quick outline like a box in the air. "At Badrock they've a little house all made with shells. I wash them sometimes, till they shine white like—like bones. I can get inside it too, though my knees stick out at the door."

"Aye, such things were the fashion once, maybe a hundred year or more ago. Mrs. Blain, she's a real one for letting' old things be. But her brother now, he'd not let anything messy clutter up here. When is he coming back, d'ye know? It's time he gave orders about the vegetables."

A puff of blue smoke blew out suddenly into the child's face, giving it a pinched, old look. "Not till I've gone," she said quietly, brushing the smoke away with one arm.

"And when will that be?"

"I don't know. They're talking about it up on the terrace." She nodded towards the thick, acrid-smelling fence of chrysanthemums almost in bloom already. "After all," she went on in the same dull quiet little voice, "he's had me here all summer, and now it's somebody else's turn."

"Gawd almighty!" said the gardener. But the child did not hear him, for she had moved away from the bonfire as she spoke, and was among the bushes again, burrowing now like a young rabbit, back into the dark private lair she had made for herself.

Some of the twigs had sprung forward, and she had to turn round and round to make enough room again. An old piece of sacking was spread on the ground with her few

private treasures scattered upon it. The toys her aunts gave her remained of course in their respective houses, but these were her own, that no one knew anything about. There was a little box with a mother-of-pearl flower on the lid and a used coronation stamp inside, as well as a pencil that wrote blue at one end and red at the other, and a white, fan-shaped shell she had picked off the side of the shell house with her nails and wouldn't have her aunt see for the world. She put these things in a row, along with the crow's wing, the gilt walnut that opened and shut with a spring, and the one red cape-gooseberry she had nipped off a spray in the drawing-room of Ovington Gardens when no one was looking.

She touched one after the other lightly with her forefinger. Shells. Balloons. Shells. Balloons. The little shell house was real compared with this makeshift hovel, besides being pretty and elegant. But the smoke drifting in from the bonfire made her think of the smell of the park in autumn, and the lane leading out of Church Street, and the balloon woman who was her friend and who always kept the bright purple balloons for her, selling the commoner yellow and red ones first.

Up on the terrace, the two women moved restlessly, turning towards one another, speaking at the same moment.

"One never gets at her somehow. I'm sure I've done my best to make her an affectionate child—"

"Charles and I often wonder what she really thinks of us. Of course, having no children ourselves, perhaps we don't understand—"

Each stopped abruptly, but the townswoman, more adroit, saw her advantage at once.

"Why, she adores you both! Badrock seems heaven to her, and the number of times I've heard about that wretched shell house—"

The thickset woman's expression softened, grew gratified. "Perhaps one does win a child's heart without knowing. Or possibly they give away their feelings more easily to others—"

"I expect that's it." Mrs. Heathcote's blurred face turned towards her. She spoke now decisively, as if they had settled

something. "So you'll have her, then? She'll be charmed to see Badrock again."

"Oh—I didn't mean that exactly. After all, she's not Charles's niece. And we thought that as you are alone now, a child in the house would be company. . . . Besides, it isn't our turn—" Her voice trailed off uncomfortably.

There was a moment's pregnant silence from the other deck chair. Then Mrs. Heathcote spoke in a voice which she strove to make light, as though uttering a joke. "Look here, why not give her the choice? I mean, call her up and ask her which of us she'd rather go to."

"Which of us . . ."

Curious thoughts flashed into the minds of both women. Dared they risk such a test? But Mrs. Blain's look of gratification at the child's apparent preference had lit a small thin flame of something like jealousy in her sister's mind. She got up suddenly and, making a trumpet of her hands, called, "Meis-a! Come here, darling—"

The other woman put down her stout legs as suddenly off the chair-rest and, walking over to the balustrade, raised a voice powerful enough without extraneous aid.

"Queenie! Come at once. I want you—" She said in ordinary tones over her shoulder, "Melissa's such a mouthful, we always call her Queenie. It's a quaint old Aberdeenshire pet-name—"

"And yet you live in Sussex." But the sarcasm was lost on Mrs. Blain, who never noticed sarcasm anyway.

They did not speak again but remained leaning over the balustrade side by side, their shoulders taut with the same strange anxiety to be loved though not loving. Beneath them the lawn rolled smoothly up to the rose-pergola, which in turn masked the vegetable garden and the shrubbery. They were high enough up to see over the pink commonplace plumes of the Dorothy Perkins, past the corner where the bonfire still hissed and sparkled, towards the dark line of the shrubbery which loomed behind the smoke in patches. Out of the smoke a small, thin voice called, "Coming, Auntie!" It might have been speaking to either of them. They could only wait.

The child came slowly out of the smoke, past the Michael-

mas daisies, and broke off a lavender-coloured head whose petals she pulled off as she walked. Shell house. Balloons. Shell house. Balloons. She knew the whole affair had been settled now, whichever way it worked out. The lattice of the pergola was just in front of her now. Shell house. Balloons. Which did she want? It didn't really matter, for both things masked pleasantly the one bit of knowledge kept carefully hidden at the back of her mind; not to be looked at; not to be recognised. . . . The shell house had a little shelf she could lay her things along. And she hadn't bought a balloon for a long while.

Watching her slow approach, the two women suddenly became afraid. It wasn't a fair test (was it?) to ask a child to proclaim her affection for one in front of the other. Queer how they hadn't thought of that before. . . . Mrs. Blain's nerve cracked first. Suddenly snatching at her purse before Queenie could come any nearer, she took a shilling out of it and said a little breathlessly, as though making a joke, "Toss you for her!"

She enjoyed the look of relief that swept over the face of the other. Mrs. Heathcote nodded. Her nervous grip on the balustrade loosened. "After all," she said magnanimously, "I really think that neither you nor I can count for much with such a cold, self-contained creature as Melissa."

Mrs. Blain said, "She might be tempted, through sheer politeness, to be insincere. And I do hate insincerity. . . . Your call. . . ."

Mrs. Heathcote called. The coin spun high in the air just as the little girl stepped through the opening in the pergola and caught its silver flash. Instantly the child knew they had been playing the same game as she had, with the bald head of the michaelmas daisy still crushed in the palm of her hand. But she had only played for balloons and shells. The coin in the air was like something sharp, cutting open her mind and exposing that secret knowledge which lay there. She stumbled a little, crossing the grass, for now a rain of silver shillings kept falling in front of her eyes, making them smart.

Her two aunts stared at her once she had climbed the balcony steps and stood beside them. "What have you been

doing to your eyes, Puss?" asked Mrs. Blain in a very loving tone. "They look quite watery and red."

"I got some smoke from the bolifire into them."

"Let me wipe them clear. And now, wouldn't you like to know which of us you are going to spend the winter with?"

They told her. "That will be very nice," said the child politely.

ELISABETH KYLE.

Is a Scot. Has been a newspaper correspondent in Central Europe and the Balkans. Author of four novels and a book on the Versailles Treaty. A short story of hers appeared in *English Story: Second Series*.

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## THE LEVEL-CROSSING

by

SYLVIA TOWNSEND WARNER

SINCE 1927 Alfred Thorn had kept the level-crossing where the road from Wellbury to Kingsfield crosses the railway. Before then he had worked in the goods-yard at Paddington. A rupture ended that employment, and the company, since he was a steady man and no drinker, transferred him to the Kingsfield L.C.

For over forty years a Londoner, and living always in the narrow, noisy, shabbily cosy district of North Paddington, he found it strange to live in the country, that was so bare and calm; and going out at night to set the gates for the passage of the 12.41 up goods train he had almost feared the heavy summer whisper of the trees, the moor-hens squawking under the bridge. With a kind of homesickness he would recall the night turn in the goods-yard, the figures under the raw arc lights, his mates shouting, the soft whine of the wind along the metals, and how, once, seeing a train come

in with a white crust still lying on the tarpaulins, he had said to himself: It's snowing in the country. And a picture was in his mind, a picture based on a Christmas card: a white landscape, a church spire, a sunset glowing between bars of cloud like the coals in a grate.

With his first winter came snow: so sudden and so heavy a fall that before he could swing back the large gates closing off the road he had to shovel the snow to one side. Some winters it snowed, some not. There was more variation in the winters than in the summers. But the years became pleasant to him, for he had taken to gardening, and the driver of the 11.5 would lean out of the cab to wave a gesture of approval towards Alfred Thorn's well-trenched celery or dark autumnal dahlias.

He was unmarried; but as a level-crossing keeper must have a companion, someone to take his place should he be suddenly disabled, he had brought with him his niece, Alice Hawkins. As a child she had been pretty, and when she went out to her first employment as a kitchen-maid it was taken for granted that in a year or two she would be married, and peeling potatoes for a household of her own. But one morning, pouring kerosene on an unwilling kitchen fire, she set fire to herself. They thought she would die of her injuries, but she lived on, her face so frightfully scarred that no one now could think of a husband for Alice, never another word coming from her wried mouth; for from shock and terror she had lost the power of speech.

At first Alfred had found it painful to be companioned by this pitiable creature, from whom the flames seemed to have burned off youth and sex and personality, leaving only the morose industry of a machine. Though her hearing was only a little impaired, words appeared to have no more meaning for her. Only very rarely would she feel the impulse to communicate, and then she would scrawl a sentence on a piece of paper, usually no more than a household request for hearth-brick or a new scrubbing brush. But insensibly a kind of harmony grew up between them, his pleasure in her good cooking and cleanliness complementing her instinct to serve, and his old bachelor habits, the easy-chair always drawn forward at the same angle, the

pipe lit at the same hour, the coat hanging from one nail and the lantern from another—giving her a sense of security, of being insured against another disaster. She lived by the trains almost as much as he, and though she would not go to the shop or to church, she would go out, almost with gladness, to work the level-crossing gates.

There was an element of monasticism about their lives. As the monk charts his days by lauds and matins, vespers and compline, Alfred Thorn lived by the four expresses, the ten locals, the six clanking goods, his being always attentive to the note of the signal that linked him to the organisation of the Great Western Railway as the chime of the bell links the monk to the organisation of Christendom.

The declaration of war in 1939 imposed many changes on the railways. Duplicated notices came to Alfred Thorn advising him of altered runnings and trains that would run no longer. His life was dislocated. In the last war, too, his life had been dislocated—soldiering had sent him hither and thither, the chiming of high explosive had been the mad timepiece he lived by. But these new days seemed reproachfully "empty, empty as the autumn landscape, the bare stubblefields, the trees growing shabby and furtively casting their leaves. And in the lengthened intervals between the clicks of the signal the noise of the river seemed as loud and intimidating as it had seemed on his first coming.

There were fewer trains; but the traffic across the metals increased. Army lorries, army cars, tanks, and escorts on motor-bicycles roared past the level-crossing gates. More and more soldiers were coming into the district—"to be given a lick," said the postman, "before they go over." One day early in October a billeting officer came to the house, asking Alfred if he could put up soldiers, and how many.

"If I sleep on the couch downstairs, there's my bedroom. It's a fair-sized room. But it has only a single bed."

"This will take five," said the officer. "Never mind about the bed. Put it away. They'll sleep on the floor."

On Sunday evening the men came. It was a wet, windy evening, and their arrival seemed to darken the house. The rain dripped off them, their feet scraped heavily on the floor, they stacked their equipment in every corner. Sourly

humorous, they complained of the delays on their train journey. They had been travelling for eleven hours, and of those hours, nearly five, they said, had been spent in waiting on platforms or in sidings.

"We could have marched it in the time."

"And kept a fair sight warmer."

"Yeah! *He* could have marched it, anyway. Twenty miles an hour's nothing to him—look at the size of his feet."

"It wouldn't have been twenty miles an hour. What's twenty clevens? Two hundred and something. You telling me it's two hundred miles from there to here?"

"Well, how far is it, smarty?"

Out of their fatigue a dispirited wrangle flickered up. Alfred and Alice served them with sausages and potatoes and a great deal of cocoa. One of the soldiers—he was a sharp-faced fellow, they called him Syd—remarked:

"You'll be out of pocket by this, you know. They don't allow you'll feed us."

"We don't often have company," said Alfred.

They were all very young. He felt embarrassed among them. His life during the last years had gone on so quietly, so regularly, that he had not thought of himself as growing older. Suddenly he saw himself an elderly man.

When the meal was over for politeness' sake they hung about a little, lighting cigarettes, staring at the pictures on the walls, the fancy calendars, the enlarged photographs of Alfred's parents, the framed certificate of his friendly society, the crayons of dogs and roses that Alice had done at school. Now Alice got up. It was time to set the gates for the 9.37. Thinking of the rain, Alfred said:

"I'm going."

But the words were hardly out of his mouth before he remembered her shyness, her deformity. Now she would be left alone with them. The train was late. By the time it had passed and he had reset the gates nearly quarter of an hour had gone by. When he got back to the house the curly-haired boy they called Ikey had sunk to the floor and was asleep with his head propped against Syd's knees. The others were in the back-kitchen helping Alice wash up. Later on, after they had stumbled upstairs, Alfred Thorn remembered

the feeling that had weighed on him as he stood waiting for the 9.37. It had been a feeling of shame as for some failure of hospitality. Now he identified it, remembering their complaints of the journey, the many delays, the cold. He found himself speaking aloud. "It's a bad thing."

Alice looked up. She nodded her head in agreement, nodded violently. Her expression was harsh and mournful. They were at cross-purposes, but he did not explain his thought. War, too, was a bad thing, at any rate most women thought so.

Agreeing with the billeting officer he had acted on impulse, worrying afterwards as to whether Alice would suffer, her long privacy laid open to the glances of five strange young men; and he had bargained with his uneasiness, planning to do this and that so that she need not come in contact with them. She had made no comment on the news of their arrival, only writing down a list of extra groceries! When they arrived she began to cook for them as a matter of course.

"My niece is dumb," he had said, that there might be no awkwardness over speeches of thanks.

*Ask for their washing*, she wrote next morning. And that afternoon she wrote again, sending him to the village shop for sultanas for a cake, darning-wool, oranges, cigarettes, seven pounds of sugar for making apple jelly. At the shop he was told that there were no sultanas and that a pound of sugar was all that he could be spared. When Alice heard this she stood a little while, her face working. Then she put on her hat, the hat she had left London in twelve years before, and went out. What happened at the shop he would never know, but she brought back all she wanted.

She feels like a mother, he thought.

A week later he was thinking: She feels happy. Yet how did he know it? She manifested no outward happiness. Sombre and reserved, she moved from oven to table, took up plates to refill them, clawed at a tunic that needed mending. They praised and thanked her, and gave her presents: boxes of chocolates, gloves, a potted chrysanthemum brought from the town by the carrier; and she accepted her presents so flatly, so ungraciously, that it seemed

to Alfred that such acceptances could only be felt as rebuffs. And yet he knew well that between Alice and the soldiers there was an intimacy that would never exist between the soldiers and himself, though it was with him that they talked and joked, played games and swopped tobacco.

"It's like that in every family," he told himself. "It's always the mother means most to the boys."

They were good boys. Syd and Ikey he thought of as the eldest and the youngest, the Reuben and the Benjamin; for it was difficult to remember that there was less than a year's difference in age between them, for Syd was already lined and sharp-spoken, while Ikey, his long lashes gleaming as he screwed up his eyes in fits of laughter, seemed no more than a child. In between came Joe, Ivor, and Wallie. Nicer young fellows you couldn't ask for. Well-mannered too, and more refined than boys had been in his day. Oh, it was a pity you couldn't look at them without seeing the khaki, without remembering the advertisement that said: *Four Out of Every Five*, and the five pictured faces with the black squares laid across four of them. Then, out of the blue, it happened.

Supper was over and cleared away, and the boys were in the back-kitchen, washing up, and he had gone out for the 9.37. To-night it was almost on time. The trains running so unpunctually had irked him, and watching the clouds of rosy steam fade on the sky he felt a warmth of pleasure, thinking: To-night, they can't laugh at me. I've got the laugh on them. For they had found out his foible, teasing him night after night when the last local kept him dawdling with his hand on the gate-lever.

Out of the dark box which was his home came the noise of the soldiers scrimmaging at the wash-bowl—a splash, feigned cries of horror and anguish, Ikey's wild warbling giggles.

And so unheard he entered the front room.

Ivor sat in the easy-chair and Alice, folding a table-cloth, stood near him. He pulled her down on his knees—a gentle, dreamy movement, the movement almost of a sleeper. With one arm about her waist he held her there; and then, his eyes averted, he began to stroke her face, her ruined cheek

and chin, She sat stiff and unmoving, staring in front of her; her red hands quietly folded on the table-cloth. Even when tears began to roll down her cheeks and through his caressing fingers, she did not move her hands.

The first thought went no further than: This is cruelly awkward for me. He wanted desperately to go away. But his duty was clear: he must put a stop to this. There could be no doubt as to how to speak; for a young man pulling a girl down on his knees, a girl ten years older than he and as frightful as a figure at a fair, was one thing only: a thief, an abuser of hospitality.

He walked forward, his footsteps tramping. Still holding Alice, still stroking her face Ivor looked up.

“I mean to marry her.”

As for the words, they might have been the words of any boy caught out, a boy who says: *I mean to give it back, I mean to mend it.* But the voice spoke something quite different, and made the words sound formal and irrevocable, like a vow, or a sentence given in court.

“You don’t know what you’re talking about. You’ll be off to France at any moment now—and she’s ten years older than you.”

He spoke gloomily, hating the words as he uttered them. Here was a young man who in a month might be dead, and a woman who since her girlhood had been doomed to a life not much better than death; and because he himself was old, and would soon be death’s due, he must needs scold them out of their moment’s happiness. From the next room came another burst of laughter. It was more than he could bear. He groaned, and sat down, and buried his face in his hands.

When he looked up they were sitting just as before, only Alice had left off crying. Now she got up, slowly, smoothly, as though all her life she had been getting up off a young man’s knee, and came over to him. And presently she, dumb Alice, moved her lips; and a faint hiss came from her as though she were shaping the word, *Please*.

“It’s one thing or another, my lad. Either you clear out, or you act square by the girl and marry her.”

“I mean to marry her.”

*Then you'd better act openly about it, and tell the others.*

The words were on his lips but he did not speak them, for at that moment the others came in. Joe proposed a game of Rummy, the evening went by like any other evening; and when Alice and Alfred were left alone she straightened the room, made up his bed on the couch, kissed him and went off to bed, just as usual.

The more he thought of it, the worse it seemed. Such a match could only bring misery to both of them—if it came to a match. And if it did not? Going out for the 12.41, the calmness, the serenity of the moonlit night seemed to throw scorn on his perplexity. The goods train rumbled past, and with all his being he yearned to throw himself into one of those trucks, to be carried to Paddington, back to the goods-yard, back to his lodging in the cosy, shabby street, back to his former strength and the cock-sureness of youth. But here he stood, old and puzzled, and of no use to any one.

Most of the night he lay awake worrying. He worried about Alice, then his thoughts would wander off to the problem of who would take her place if she married and left him. But she might marry, and yet remain with him, and bear a child. A level-crossing is no place for a child, and if the war went on long enough, or Alice were widowed by it, the child would be of an age to stagger on to the track or out into the road, and be run over. How long would the war go on? How much higher would prices go? When would the air raids begin? There was a movement overhead, and in an instant he was on his feet, shaking with rage. No! There should be no such doings under his roof. The next minute he heard a window closed, and the footsteps recrossing the floor, and a sigh, and a creak of the boards as the closer of the window settled again to his sleep. Overcome with shame and misery Alfred lay down also. What would he think next? What had come over him that he should nurse such suspicions, such jealousy? And what was to be done about Alice?

In the morning he looked at her narrowly, anxiously. There was no change of expression in her marred face, no lightening of her tread, no outward indication of love or

the astonishment of love. Yet somehow from her dull uncharged face and unchanged mechanical serenity there streamed a conviction of being loved and being triumphant. As for Ivor, he was no more and no less than the others: a boy in a hurry who would be punished if he were late for school.

Sorrow is not so self-sufficient as joy. Alfred Thorn had meant to deal with his trouble unaided, to say no word of the matter. But when the soldiers came back at the end of the day he buttonholed Syd, and took him into the dusky garden.

"Something's happened that shouldn't have. Ivor says he wants to marry my Alice."

"Does he?"

There was so little surprise in the words that Alfred Thorn exclaimed in instant furious suspicion:

"Did you know about it, then? Has he been talking about it?"

"Not a word. But I'm not altogether surprised. He's been looking at her a lot."

"Looking at her? What sort of looking?"

"Just looking."

"Oh, well, I don't like it. What makes a boy like him run after a girl like her?"

"She's a very nice girl. She's very kind."

"But she's dumb! And her face. Her face, you know. Those scars."

"Perhaps he likes the scars."

"Likes them? Likes them?"

Shaking with anger he glared into the young man's face. But it gave him back no look of irony or insolence—unless it be insolent for a young man to look so calmly on an old man in a fury.

"People do, you know. Some people. It's psychological. For him it might be just the attraction."

"I don't know what you call it. I call it plain disgusting. Morbid, I call it."

"You can't blame the boy for being morbid if he's made that way."

"Oh, can't I? You'll see if I can't blame him."

"Well, Mr. Thorn, you'd be wrong. What you're feeling is something very old-fashioned. Nowadays——"

But Alfred Thorn had turned his back, and was stumping off. Reaching the garden gate he paused, and shouted:

"Tell her I shan't be in till the 9.37."

He went off down the railway track, lurching from sleeper to sleeper.

"Maybe a drink will comfort him," thought Syd. He considered the old man to be stupid, and certainly in the wrong; but he had a responsible nature and felt a soldierly impulse to tidy him. It had been such a happy household till now.

Alfred Thorn, however, was not walking to the public-house. A mile further down the track the Wellbury branch line came in, and here was a signal-box. A signal-box can be a very comfortable place, standing above the cares of the common world, warm in winter, in summer airy, with a mug of tea on the window-sill. Now he was going to the signal-box for shelter, to take sanctuary in his profession. It was as good as he'd hoped. The tea was strong, and they talked of railway matters, and Vincent Jones sang his song of "Crawshay Bailey had an engine," and laughed, and said that war would never change Wales, and perhaps not change England much either. But the clock hung on the wall, and the reminders of time rang and chirped through the conversation, and too soon it was time to go back for the 9.37.

It was a cloudy night, and cold, with a gusty November wind. The moon had not risen yet. The wind droned in the telegraph wires; though he walked with bent head he could know when he was approaching another telegraph pole by the heavy throbbing that spread into the air. He felt fretted and discouraged. It was hard to leave Vincent Jones, a man of his own age and profession, and return to a pack of soldiers—five young men all banded together against an old man, laughing at him up their sleeves, teasing him about the trains being unpunctual. And so he would wait outside the house till the 9.37 had gone through.

Walking to and fro he had an impression that someone was near by. There were no footsteps on the road, no sounds

but the wind crying through the wires and along the metals, and the rustle of trees, and the shed-door rattling. But he cried out:

"Is anyone there?"

No answer. One of those boys, he thought, following me out to tease me, on the chance of the train being late. Late it was, too. The third quarter had struck and still it was not signalled. A bicyclist came down the road, his light a low wobbling star, and dismounted.

"You can cross. She isn't signalled yet."

The bicycle was edged through the wicket-gate and wheeled across the track. The rider was young Harry Foley and as he rode off he cried:

"Good-night, Mr. Thorn. Hope you don't wait much longer. Don't catch cold. There's a lot of the 'flu about."

That's how the young think, thought Alfred. Hoping is easy work for them. But as the minutes went by his grievance faded from his mind, shouldered aside by anxiety at the train's delay. Ten o'clock had struck. Something must have happened. An accident? An air raid?

From cold, from anxiety, he began to walk up the line. A creature of his profession, part of the organisation of the Great Western Railway, he set out on the up line, and turning came back on the other. His foot struck against something lying in his way. It was heavy, yielding, human. Dead? No, alive! For it rose up, and tried to run. But in the darkness he caught it, and found himself holding on to a man, dressed in tight-fitting clothes of coarse woollen cloth.

"Now what's this? Who are you?"

"I—I must have been asleep."

"Ivor!"

"Yes, it's me, Mr. Thorn."

The boy was shaking with cold and his teeth chattered.

"Now what are you up to? What were you doing here?"

"I must have fallen asleep. I was waiting."

His voice was senseless, he spoke as though still heavy with a dream.

"Waiting? What for?"

"The 9.37. *Where is it?*" he cried out suddenly. "Oh, damn your trains, they're always late."

"You'd best tell me what all this is about," said Alfred Thorn.

"I can't stick it," lamented the boy. "It's no use. I can't go through with it."

"Now, now," said the old man. "You've got worked up, that's what it is. You're young, and it's hard for you. But you mustn't act so silly, boy. War's a thing one gets used to like everything else. Lots of people come through it, and none the worse. I was in the last war myself, I know what I'm talking about."

"It's not the war."

"Not the war? What is it, then?"

"Marrying Alice. I can't go through with it."

The signal rang. Alfred took the boy by the arm and began towing him along the track-side.

"It's her face. I thought it would help, but it doesn't. From the moment I set eyes on her——"

He paused, shuddering.

"That's right," said Alfred. "You tell it from the beginning."

"In Camberwell—I come from Camberwell—there was an exhibition got up by some Peace people or other. And I went in for a look. I'd never thought about war till then. They had a lot of photos. Photos of people wounded in the last war, and still alive to this day."

His voice rose into a scream. When he began again it was in a whisper.

"The worst of them was a man with half his face shot away. Ever since I've been trying to forget it. But I couldn't. Then this happened, and I was called."

"I said all along it was too young," said Alfred.

"When I saw Alice—she isn't so bad, though, nothing like so bad—I couldn't bear to look at her. Then I thought: Suppose I do look at her? Maybe I'll get used to it. Then I couldn't but look at her. It fascinated me. Then I thought: If I could only touch her face, stroke it, then somehow I could get used to it, forgive it. *For that's what will happen to me!* I know it, I've known it all along."

Now they had reached the level-crossing, and stood by the gate. Touching the smooth cold surface, Alfred felt that

they had overcome the worst, reached some kind of assurance.

"And she sat so still, letting me stroke her. I couldn't help it, it was like something that would go on for ever. And then you came in, and I thought: It's got to be like this."

From far off, through the curtaining wind, came the faint regular pulsing of the engine, a feeling on the ear-drums rather than a sound.

"But it's no use, no use! I can't go through with it. When I begin to realise it I know I can't."

A delicate rosy light bloomed on the darkness. The train was audible now.

"So I came out here to end it all.. But the train didn't come. I lay down on the line, I must have dropped off to sleep. We've been hard at it all the day."

The train came thundering on, its full steam-voice armoured in clankings and clatterings. It was not possible to speak and be heard. At last, Alfred could say:

"Well, you can't marry her, that's certain."

As he spoke his hand pressed the lever and the gates swung back, leaving the road clear. A couple of cars went through.

"But who's going to tell her?"

"I can't, Mr. Thorn."

"I don't fancy it either."

In the silence that followed they knew themselves drawn together, sharing for the first time a common emotion, a common uneasiness. Ivor pulled out a packet of cigarettes.

"May be Syd could. He's best at explaining."

But Alice did not hear it from Syd. The next day they came in with the news that they were to be sent off for a course of machine-gunning. There was a flurry of departure, and on the morrow, early, they were gone. "I'll write," Ivor had said.

Two days later the letter came. He saw her reading it, a slow task, for she was little used to letter-reading. She folded it up, and put it back in the envelope, and laid the envelope on the mantelpiece under the tea-canister. He watched in an agony of pity and embarrassment. He dared not speak, and she could not. Her face became deeply flushed. and the more hideous for being so.

After a while his honour broke down, and being alone in the room he looked under the canister. The letter was gone.

Early in December new soldiers arrived, and the policeman brought another billeting notice. Awkward with compassion, and speaking almost harshly, Alfred said:

"You've only to say if you don't want them, Alice."

She found her pencil, and wrote:

*Let them come.*

Did she hope in some obscure romance of her heart that the new batch of soldiers would bring her another lover, and a kinder one? Was she bent on proving to herself that the wound of Ivor was only a surface wound, and healing? It was impossible to say. She looked after these as efficiently, as commandingly, as she had looked after those others, and moved among them firmly and seemingly content. Alfred thought: She'd rather have them than be alone with me. And perhaps she put their unconsciousness of her tragedy between herself and his knowledge. As Christmas neared she began to make preparations, baking and icing a Christmas cake, buying coloured paper garlands and looping them across the ceiling. Gipsies came through the village selling mistletoe. One of the soldiers bought a bunch and brought it in. She nodded approvingly, and hung it in the centre of the room.

Late that afternoon she went into the garden to fetch the washing. She stood there for some time, staring about her. In her attitude there was something of release and sudden boldness, as though she had come out of prison. Perhaps the wind, blowing her hair and fluttering her skirts, had blown this look on to her. On her return she took up her pencil and wrote on a slip of paper, and handed it to Alfred. She had written the word *Snow*.

For a minute he thought it was something she wanted him to get from the shop, something for Christmas.

"Snow, Alice?"

She pointed out of the window at the calm cold sky and the bare landscape, and nodded her head decisively.

When, a few days later, the snow came, and all the railway traffic was disorganised, she went about with a queer look

of triumph, and began to treat him more affectionately, as though her prophecy coming true had reconciled them and put them back on the old footing.

SYLVIA TOWNSEND WARNER.

Born 1893. Was professional musician till "law of supply and demand tilted me into letters." Author of number of well-known novels and two books of short stories. A story of hers was published in *English Story: First Series*.

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A GOOD LUNCH  
by  
NICHOLAS MOORE

**N**O, no, no, said Mrs. Willoughby, as if the thought pained her. No, John, I will not have it.

Michael looked at her pathetically. He didn't see that there was much he could do. If she wished to call him John, he could not help it. Or could he help it? He looked at himself pathetically and decided he couldn't.

Myra darling, I've got to go, he said. Any time now they may be coming back, he said. Yes, any time now. And then where would we be? Don't you think they would think something then? Don't you think they would?

John dear, said Mrs. Willoughby, you must be out of your head. What on earth can the harm be? Julian's my own son, isn't he? Kay's my own daughter. What would they think, I'd like to know, if they thought their mother wasn't being honest with them? John, how can you be so thoughtless?

My name is not John, said Michael with an effort. He went over to the door, and took his beautiful stetson hat off the peg, and turned round to bid the woman adieu. He was tired of this cat-and-mouse game, tired, and he had no wish to see Julian, Kay, Ellen or anyone else. Myra was his only

when they were alone. In a room with other people she was like some decorative piece of furniture that everyone used. Yes, he said to himself, I will bid the woman adieu.

Good-bye, he said. He put his hand on the handle, the beautiful shiny handle, and began to turn it idly, nonchalantly. Smoothly and sweetly. Gently and quietly.

John, said Mrs. Willoughby imperiously. Don't go yet, I've just got a letter I want you to post. So Michael turned back just as the door was closing behind him, and glanced pathetically at his reflection in the big standing mirror.

Of course I'll be delighted to post it for you, he said. Mrs. Willoughby leapt nimbly out of the big four-poster bed, and ran across the room in her light mauve negligée. In the corner there was a sort of bureau. Where all my secrets are kept, she would say. She busied herself there for a while, while Michael stood in front of the mirror and adjusted his hat. While he turned his coat-collar up and then down again, while he wondered nervously what the time could be now, and whether Julian or Kay or any of the others would catch him here. Not knowing the time was something he couldn't bear. It was stupid of him to have left his watch to be mended. He should have kept it to tinker with himself. And why hadn't Myra a clock? Not a single clock. Good God, you'd think she'd need it. But then she never did seem to care much what time she got to an appointment. She was quite irresponsible. He wished he was at home having a quiet breakfast of tea and toast, and marmalade if the rations would run to it. My God, toast and marmalade! What wouldn't he give for it? And soon perhaps there wouldn't be any more.

After a final skirmish Mrs. Willoughby emerged triumphantly with the letter, addressed to Frank Odhams, Esquire, Lollies Ditch, Margate, and without a word she handed it to him.

He turned again to the door.

No, no, no, she thought, you can't do this to me. I won't have you running out on me like this, John Miles, when I have given up all my best years to you.

No, John, she said.

Michael turned to her with a weary smile. Look here,

Myra, I must go. I don't know what time it is. I don't know what time it might not be. I've got a busy day before me and . . .

No, she said firmly, and smiled up into his face. He looked resigned, shrugged, and threw himself down into a chair.

You can do anything with me, he said.

Kay. Kay polishing her nose, twisting her hair, pulling faces at herself in the mirror. Kay always bright and early. Kay always daft and delicious.

Her nose was a little peeked nose, turned up at the top. Her hair fell over her brow in a little frill. Her eyes were blue, a pale blue, which was queer with the rich brown hair, and the dark complexion. Very candid they looked. Very.

She was pleased with the elegant conceit of her appearance. The frank conceit of it. Oh, what a beautiful little mouth she had, what a figure.

Having admired herself from all angles, it was time to go out and have breakfast, and then visit mother. Mother who would be lying in bed reading one of her book-club books, quite unaware of anything on in the world. Quite unaware of the war. Quite unaware of her charming, delightful, innocent little daughter. . . .

And then there was Robin.

At the thought of Robin she pursed her mouth thoughtfully and suddenly sat down again in front of the mirror. Sat down with all the stuffing knocked out of her, with all the jauntiness and conceit melting away. Her little peeked nose was no longer attractive, snub-nosed little piggy now, reprehensible, girlish, hateful.

Her blue eyes clouded over with hate.

Robin. Robin was a knockout. Robin was a good fellow. Robin was charming. Oh, how she hated his nonchalant rejection of her sweetness, his sour, polished, tense look. The cynosure of all eyes was Robin. He walked about a room as if he owned it, knowing that in fact he did own it, for he owned every heart there in it, every yearning feminine heart, every admiring, envious male. Yes, he owned the world all right. Let him, said Kay viciously to herself, let him. But

what she could not bear to think, what she did not dare to acknowledge was that it was her world of which he was master. She, the bright one, the imperturbable, she and all her beauty depended on him. Oh dear. Oh dear.

She felt weak and clutched for support on her chair. Then, with a firm withering look at herself in the glass, she got up, put on her hat and hurried out. Breakfast—with marmalade.. That would set anyone up. But now of course there might be no marmalade. Oh, God. Everything was coming to an end. Everything. She would soon be typing in an office, or making munitions.

Munitions . . . at that she shuddered, thinking again of Robin, poor suave Robin in his officer's uniform.

Her blue eyes were troubled with pity and love.

Julian came in at half-past twelve, with a hey nonny no. He had had a drink on the way. One drink, and another drink, as many as he could take in a quarter of an hour at the Green Maiden. By this time he was full of love for his mother. Full of it. Oh yes, full of it.

He burst into the room without knocking. Hullo, Ma, hullo, Ma. The top of the morning to you. Why, who's this, who's this—gigolo?

He subsided into a chair with a titter. Michael was standing awkwardly by the mantelpiece. Myra, he began to say, but thought better of it.

Julian dear, said Mrs. Willoughby in a shocked but loving voice. Julian dear, meet Mr. John Foss. He's a very dear friend of mine.

My name's Michael, said Michael pathetically.

Delighted, I'm sure, said Julian with a grin. There was a pause, then a loud aside from Julian. Where on earth did you pick him up, Ma?

Michael was subsiding into an uncomfortable state of dream. This was all unreal. All these impossible people. What was he doing here? It must be a nightmare, a dream, an hallucination. Julian? Who was he? What could he be doing walking about on a Friday, if it was Friday morning, if it was morning, during war-time, a young man who should be a soldier or at work, helping Russia. Yes, that

was the thing, wasn't it, to help Russia. He remembered the papers said. But before this war began Russia was a dream, Myra was a dream, no Julian, no Kay, nothing was as it is now. Michael sighed and tried to remember his past.

At this point he went off into a dream from which it seemed he would never wake.

He was a little boy again, at a place called Oxton, or perhaps Foxton, or more likely Rockstone. For it was a memory of rocks and stones, of clambering over pebbly beaches into the sea, of climbing sandy cliffs, the gulls mewing above, and the sea stretching endlessly, beautifully below. Above the blue sky, the white clouds, and the bright yellow of dandelions at the top of the cliff, or the pink sea-pinks. He could remember too a spaniel with straggly ears.

He could remember looking at the anemones in the rock pools, catching them, and putting them in a pail, and his sadness when they died there. Sandcastles he made on the beach. And bathing in the sea.

Then human beings were dangerous, for they might drag one off home. It was better to be alone. Then time counted for nothing, and the day never came to an end until you were tired.

Once he had watched a pair of lovers lying among the grasses of the sandhills.

Like the gulls, he was a sort of spy, seeing things from a distance, detached and happy. The actions of the other people did not touch him at all, not at all. Oh, blue was the sky.

Michael, Michael, called his mother's voice or the voice of another, a nurse or a playmate, and he would hide among the grasses for hours where he could not be seen, in order to avoid the hard touch of the world, the cold futility of the human mind.

He would savour the sound of his name, and laugh madly.

Julian was still talking sottishly, drunkenly, babbling.

Oughtn't you to be at your work, dear? asked Mrs. Willoughby absent-mindedly. She was powdering herself, and arranging her hair, dabbing here and there and everywhere, again and again, never content to let *he*.

It's a beautiful day, said Julian. I told her to go on taking my dictation. I had another engagement. Yessir, she said, and looked at me. She gave me such a look. I said, You know I used to be an artist before this bloody war. An artist must make the best of a day like this. Why, it's my mother's birthday to-day, I said. Oh yes, she replied, and then added sir as a sort of afterthought. Well, you get on with the dictation, I said. You know what to do, I said. Yessir, she said, giggling. So I just went off an hour early to be with my darling mum.

Oh, Julian dear, said Mrs. Willoughby, delighted. Then, is it really my birthday, darling?

How should I know, Ma, I wasn't born then.

Do you know, said Mrs. Willoughby, I believe it really is.

I could see by the way she looked at me, said Julian, that she didn't really believe me. She thought I'd got another kind of a date. Look here, I said. I won't stand no nonsense. This is an important war job, my girl. Aren't we employed by his Majesty's ministry? And she said, Well, I am. And I asked, What about me? She said, Well, you could hardly be said to be employed, could you? And I said, Madam I'm an artist. It was on my dignity that I left her.

Julian dear, I don't believe a word you say.

You're right, Mother, I always was a liar. As a matter of fact I kissed her delicately on the cheek, and said, Excuse me a moment pretty miss (hic), I'm going to the lavatory, the w.c., would you like to come along with me. To which she replied, No, I'm not one of those girls, you must have been reading Henry Miller, scoot. So I scooted right along to you, Mother.

What are you talking about, sweetest?

Just telling you about my job, Ma. How I left it?

Oh, darling, you haven't lost your job, have you?

Lost it. Good God no. I'm indispensable. Indispensable Archie, that's me.

That reminds me, what became of Archie Longfellow?

He became a little short and went to Monte Carlo. Ha, ha, ha, said Julian.

No, really, darling?

He's in the censorship department.

Oh yes. John dear.

Michael was lost. He was at Bodmin, walking along with a beautiful, tall, slender girl.

John, John, what's the matter with you?

His name's Michael, said Julian, laughing.

Kay arrived about one o'clock, and by that time Mrs. Willoughby was practically dressed. She came in brightly. Hullo everybody, coming out to lunch?

As quickly as all her coats, furs, jewels, bags and things could be assembled, Mrs. Willoughby led the party out into the street.

Where are we going to? asked Michael.

Nobody took any notice. They just walked along the pavement, idly, varying in speed from one moment to the next. Kay was talking all the time. Julian, you sot, she said. How long have you been drinking before you came round? (At least I don't stay in bed till twelve, he said.) How's the work at the office? Do you have to deal with secrets? Mother, do tell me what you want for your birthday? It's on September 28th, isn't it? (Isn't it to-day, dear, said Mrs. Willoughby?)

I met an awfully nice man at Billy's party the other day. He was a poet or something. Do you know him, Julian? (What's his name? said Julian, yawning. What's happened to Robin, dear? asked Mrs. Willoughby. I don't think we've been introduced, said Michael.) I've been worrying a lot about this call-up. Shan't I have to do something? Mother, do you think I should set up as a dressmaker? Or making hats? I should like to do that. Do you think they'd let me?

And then suddenly for no reason she waved a handkerchief at a passing taxi, and for no reason that Michael could see they all bundled in. The taximan started it up, and Kay spoke to him through the glass. The Majorca, she said deliberately. What's that? said Julian.

Kay gave him a pitying glance. Poor Julian, she thought, poor Mum. Her heart was filled with a sort of silvery pity for all her family. They were so incapable, so inconsequent.

Why, Mrs. Willoughby might be living in 1925 for all she

knew. This might be a fine dinner party or a prelude to the theatre instead of a late lunch.

She thought suddenly of Robin, and her eyes clouded with pain. She relapsed into silence.

Julian was humming to himself, and smirking out of the window. Mrs. Willoughby was smiling absently at Michael, and he was lost again in his memories of the sea. (Judith, I love you, he had said. Silverly she had laughed. O Michael, dear. Poor Michael.)

At the Majorca they handed their coats to the man at the door, and were found a table. The menu was in Spanish. Tell me what they mean, said Mrs. Willoughby. Does any one know what they mean? Kay asked the waiter and they had the dishes translated for them, and made their order.

Then Kay noticed Michael.

Who is this, she thought. I don't think we've been introduced. She studied him deliberately, smiling. She looked at his smooth black hair, his slightly unshaven chin, his neat dark suit, his worried grey eyes.

Julian saw her looking him up and down. I don't think you've been introduced, he said. One of Mother's young men. He smiled ingratiatingly. Oh, meet John, interposed Mrs. Willoughby absently, John Foss.

My name's Mi . . . he began, but Julian laughed. This is Mr. Michael Foss, Kay, he said. An expert at saying nothing, and playing the quiet gentleman. Johnny, this is my sister Kay. You should get to know each other.

Yes, I think we should, said Kay, smiling. How do you do, Michael?

Michael looked at her and felt he was a child again, and suddenly for no reason felt very happy.

Kay? I like that name, he said.

#### NICHOLAS MOORE.

Born 1918. Has obtained recognition as one of the leading younger poets. Has published two books of poems, *A Wish in Season* and *The Island and the Cattle*. Is married. Contributor at *English Story: First Series*.

# PINK M.A.Y

by

## ELIZABETH BOWEN

“**Y**ES, it was funny,” she said, “about the ghost. It used to come into my bedroom when I was dressing for dinner—when I was dressing to go out.”

“*You were frightened?*”

“I was in such a hurry; there never was any time. When you have to get dressed in such a hell of a hurry any extra thing is just one thing more. And the room at the times I’m talking about used to be full of daylight—sunset. It had two french windows, and they were on a level with the tops of may trees out in the square. Then may was in flower that month, and it was pink. In that sticky sunshine you have in the evenings the may looked sort of theatrical. It used to be part of my feeling of going out.” She paused, then said, “That was the month of my life.”

“*What month?*”

“The month we were in that house. I told you, it was a furnished house that we took. With rents the way they are now, it cost less than a flat. They say a house is more trouble, but this was no trouble, because we treated it like a flat, you see. I mean, we were practically never in. I didn’t try for a servant because I know there aren’t any. When Neville got up in the mornings he percolated the coffee; a char came in to do cleaning when I’d left for the depot, and we fixed with the caretaker next door to look after the boiler, so the baths were hot. And the beds were comfortable, too. The people who really lived there did themselves well.”

“*You never met them?*”

“No, never—why should we? We’d fixed everything through an agent, the way one does. I’ve an idea the man was soldiering somewhere, and she’d gone off to be near him somewhere in the country. They can’t have had any

children, any more than we have—it was one of those small houses, just for two."

"*Pretty?*"

"Y—yes," she said. "It was chintzy. It was one of those oldish houses made over new inside. But you know how it is about other people's belongings—you can't ever quite use them, and they seem to watch you the whole time. Not that there was any question of settling down—how could we, when we were both out all day? And at the beginning of June we moved out again."

"*Because of the . . . ?*"

"Oh no," she said quickly. "Not that reason, at all." She lighted a cigarette, took two puffs and appeared to deliberate. "But what I'm telling you *now* is about the ghost."

"*Go on.*"

"I was going on. As I say, it used to be funny, dressing away at top speed at the top of an empty house, with the sunset blazing away outside. It seems to me that all those evenings were fine. I used to take taxis back from the depot: you must pay money these days if you want time, and a bath and a change from the skin up was essential—you don't know how one feels after packing parcels all day! I couldn't do like some of the girls I worked with and go straight from the depot on to a date. I can't go and meet someone unless I'm feeling special. So I used to hare home. Neville was never in."

"*I'd been going to say . . .*"

"No, Neville worked till all hours, or at least he had to hang round in case something else should come in. So he used to dine at his club on the way back. Most of the food would be off by the time he got there. It was partly that made him nervy, I dare say."

"*But you weren't nervy?*"

"I tell you," she said, "I was happy. Madly happy—perhaps in rather a nervy way. Whatever you are these days, you are rather more so. That's one thing I've discovered about this war."

"*You were happy . . .*"

"I had my reasons—which don't come into the story."

After two or three minutes of rapid smoking she leaned forward to stub out her cigarette. "Where was I?" she said, in a different tone.

"*Dressing . . .*"

"Well, first thing when I got in I always went across and opened my bedroom windows, because it seemed to me the room smelted of the char. So I always did that before I turned on my bath. The glare on the trees used to make me blink, and the thick sort of throaty smell of the may came in. I was never certain if I liked it or not, but it somehow made me feel like after a drink. Whatever happens to-morrow, I've got to-night. You know the feeling? Then I turned on my bath. The bathroom was the other room on that floor, and a door led through to it from one side of the bed. I used to have my bath with that door ajar, to let light in. The bathroom black-out took so long to undo."

"While the bath ran in I used to potter about and begin to put out what I meant to wear, and cold-cream off my old make-up, and so on. I say 'potter' because you cannot hurry a bath. I also don't mind telling you that I whistled. Well, what's the harm in *somebody's* being happy? Simply thinking things over won't win this war. Looking back at that month, I whistled most of the time. The way they used to look at me, at the depot! The queer thing is, though, I remember whistling but I can't remember when I happened to stop. But I must *have* stopped, because it was then I heard."

"*Heard?*"

She lit up again, with a slight frown. "What was it I heard first, that first time? I suppose, the silence. So I must have stopped whistling, mustn't I? I was lying there in my bath, with the door open behind me, when the silence suddenly made me sit right up. Then I said to myself, 'My girl, there's nothing queer about *that*. What else would you expect to hear, in an empty house?' All the same, it made me heave the other way round in my bath, in order to keep one eye on the door. After a minute I heard what wasn't a silence—which immediately made me think that Neville had come in early, and I don't mind telling you I said 'Damn.'"

“*O'h?*”

“It's a bore being asked where one is going, though it's no bother to say where one has been. If Neville *was* in he'd be certain to search the house, so I put a good face on things and yelled '*Hoi!*' But he didn't answer, because it wasn't him.”

“?”

“No, it wasn't. And whatever was in my bedroom must have been in my bedroom for some time. I thought, 'A wind has come up and got into that damned chintz!' Any draught always fidgets me; somehow it gets me down. So I got out of my bath and wrapped the big towel round me and went through to shut the windows in my room. But I was surprised when I caught sight of the may trees—all their branches were standing perfectly still. That seemed queer. At the same time, the door I'd come through from the bathroom blew shut, and the lid fell off one of my jars of face cream on to the dressing-table, which had a glass top.

“No, I didn't see what it was. The point was, whatever it was saw me.

“That first time, the whole thing was so slight. If it had been only that one evening, I dare say I shouldn't have thought of it again. Things only get a hold on you when they go on happening. But I always have been funny in one way—I especially don't like being watched. You might not think so from my demeanour, but I don't really like being criticised. I don't think I get my knife into other people: why should they get their knife into me? I don't like it when my ear begins to burn.

“I went to put the lid back on the jar of cream and switch the lights on into the mirror, which being between the two windows never got the sort of light you would want. I thought I looked odd in the mirror—rattled. I said to myself, 'Now what have I done to *someone*? ' but except for Neville I literally couldn't think. Anyway, there was no time—when I picked up my wrist-watch I said, 'God!' So I flew round, dressing. Or rather, I flew round as much as one could with something or somebody getting in the way. That's all I remember about that *first* time, I think. Oh yes,

I did notice that the veil on my white hat wasn't all that it ought to be. When I had put that hat out before my bath the whole affair had looked as crisp as a marguerite—a marguerite that has only opened to-day.

"You know how it is when a good deal hangs on an evening—you simply can't afford to be not in form. So I gave myself a good shake on the way downstairs. 'Snap out of that!' I said. 'You've got personality. You can carry a speck or two on the veil.'

"Once I got to the restaurant—once I'd met him—the whole thing went out of my mind. I was in twice as good form as I'd ever been. And the turn events took . . .

"It was about a week later that I had to face it. I was up against something. The more the rest of my life got better and better, the more that one time of each evening got worse and worse. Or rather, it wanted to. But I wasn't going to let it. With everything else quite perfect—well, would you have? There's something exciting, I mean, some sort of a challenge about knowing someone's *trying* to get you down. And when that someone's another woman you soon get a line on her technique. She was jealous, that was what was the matter with her.

"Because, at all other times the room was simply a room. There wasn't any objection to me and Neville. When I used to slip home he was always asleep. I could switch all the lights on and kick my shoes off and open and shut the cupboards—he lay like the dead. He *was* abnormally done in, I suppose. And the room was simply a room in somebody else's house. And the mornings, when he used to roll out of bed and slip-slop down to make the coffee, without speaking, exactly like someone walking in his sleep, the room was no more than a room in which you've just woken up. The may outside looked pink-pearl in the early sunshine, and there were some regular birds who sang. Nice. While I waited for Neville to bring the coffee I used to like to lie there and think my thoughts.

"If he was awake at all before he had left the house, he and I exchanged a few perfectly friendly words. I had *no* feeling of anything blowing up. If I let him form the impression that I'd been spending the evenings 'at movies'

with girl friends I'd begun to make at the depot, then going back to their flats to mix Ovaltine—well, that seemed to me the considerate thing to do. If he'd even been more interested in my life—but he wasn't interested in anything but his work. I never picked on him about that—I must say, I do know when a war's a war. Only, men are so different. You see, this other man worked just as hard but *was* interested in me. He said he found me so restful. Neville never said that. In fact, all the month we were in that house, I can't remember anything Neville said at all.

"No, what *she* couldn't bear was my going out, like I did. She was either a puritan, with some chip on her shoulder, or else she'd once taken a knock. I incline to that last idea—though I can't say why.

"No, I can't say why. I have never at all been a subtle person. I don't know whether that's a pity or not. I must say I don't care for subtle people—my instinct would be to give a person like that a miss. And on the whole I should say I'd succeeded in doing so. But that, you see, was where her advantage came in. You can't give a—, well, I couldn't give *her* a miss. She was there. And she aimed at encircling me."

"I think maybe she had a poltergeist that she brought along with her. The little things that happened to my belongings. . . . Each evening I dressed in that room I lost five minutes—I mean, each evening it took me five minutes longer to dress. But all that was really below her plane. That was just one start at getting me down before she opened up with her real technique. The really subtle thing was the way her attitude changed. That first time (as I've told you) I felt her disliking me—well, really 'dislike' was to put it mildly. But after an evening or two she was through with that. She conveyed the impression that she had got me taped and was simply so damned sorry for me. She was sorry about every garment I put on, and my hats were more than she was able to bear. She was sorry about the way I did up my face—she used to be right at my elbow when I got ~~out~~ my make-up, absolutely silent with despair. She was sorry I should never again see thirty, and sorry I should kid myself about that, . . . I mean to say, she started pitying me.

"Do you see what I mean when I say her attitude could have been quite infectious?"

"And that wasn't all she was sorry for me about. I mean, there are certain things that a woman who's being happy keeps putting out of her mind. (I mean, when she's being happy about a man.) And other things you keep putting out of your mind if your husband is *not* the man you are being happy about. There's a certain amount you don't ask yourself, and a certain amount that you might as well not remember. Now those were exactly the things she kept bringing up. She liked to bring those up better than anything."

"What I don't know is, and what I still don't know—*why* do all that to a person who's being happy? To a person who's living the top month of her life, with the may in flower and everything? What had I ever done to her? She was dead—I suppose? . . . Yes, I see now, she must have taken a knock."

"What makes you think that?"

"I know now how a knock feels."

"Oh . . . ?"

"Don't look at me such a funny way. I haven't changed, have I? You wouldn't have noticed anything? . . . I expect it's simply this time of year: August's a rather tiring month. And things end without warning, before you know where you are. I hope the war will be over by next spring; I do want to be abroad, if I'm able to. Somewhere where there's nothing but pines or palms. I don't want to see London pink may in flower again—ever."

"Won't Neville . . . ?"

"Neville? Oh, didn't you really realise? Didn't I——? He, I, we've—I mean, we're living apart." She rose and took the full, fuming ash-tray across to another table, and hesitated, then brought an empty tray back. "Since we left that house," she said. "I told you we left that house. That was why. We broke up.

"It was the *other* thing that went wrong," she said. "If I'd still kept my head with Neville, he and I needn't ever—I mean, one's marriage *is* something. . . . I'd thought I'd always be married, whatever else happened. I ought to have

realised Neville was in a nervy state. Like a fool I spilled over to Neville; I lost my head. But by that time I hadn't any control left. When the one thing you've lived for has crashed to bits . . .

"Crashed was the word. And yet I see now, really, that things had been weakening for some time. At the time I didn't see, any more than I noticed the may was fading out in the square—till one morning the weather changed and I noticed the may was brown. All the happiness stopped like my stopping whistling—but at what particular moment I'm never sure.

"The beginnings of the end of it were so small. Like my being a bit more unpunctual every evening we met. That made us keep losing our table at restaurants—you know how the restaurants are these days. Then I somehow got the idea that none of my clothes were becoming; I began to think he was eyeing my hats unkindly, and that made me fidget and look my worst. Then I got an idiot thing about any girl that he spoke of—I didn't like anyone being younger than me. Then, at what had once been our most perfect moments, I began to ask myself if I *was* really happy, till I said to him—which was fatal—'Is there so much in this?' . . . I should have seen more red lights—when, for instance, he said, 'You know, *you're* getting nervy.' And he quite often used to say 'Tired?' in rather a tired way. I used to say, it was just getting dressed in a rush. But the fact is, a man hates the idea of a woman rushing. One night I know I did crack: I said, 'Hell, I've got a ghost in my room!' He put me straight into a taxi and sent me—not took me—home.

"I did see him several times after that. So his letter—his letter was a complete surprise. . . . The joke was, I really had been out with a girl that evening I came in, late, to find his letter.

"If Neville had not been there when I got the letter, Neville and I might still—I suppose—be married. On the other hand—there are always two ways to see things—if Neville had *not* been there I should have gone mad. . . . So now," she said, with a change of tone, "I'm living in an hotel. Till I see how things turn out. Till the war is over, or

something. It isn't really so bad, and I'm out all day. Look I'll give you my address and telephone number. It's been wonderful seeing you, darling. You promise we'll meet again? I do really need to keep in touch with my friends. And you don't so often meet someone who's seen a ghost!

"But look, did you ever see it?"

"Well, not exactly. No, I can't say I *saw* it."

"You mean, you simply heard it?"

"Well, not exactly that . . ."

"You saw things move?"

"Well, I never turned round in time. I . . ."

"Listen—what proof have you there was a ghost, at all?"

"If you don't understand—I'm sorry I ever told you the story! Not a ghost—when it ruined my whole life! Don't you see, can't you see there must have been *something*? Let to oneself, one doesn't ruin one's life!"

#### ELIZABETH BOWEN.

Irish. One of the best-known present-day short story writers. Her last collection was *Look at All Those Roses*.





